



150 research groups on the scientific map of the world

An interview with Prof. Paul De KNOP,
Rector of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Could you please give us a brief overview of the VUB's activities?

The Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) is celebrating a double anniversary in 2009-2010. Together with the ULB (Université Libre de Bruxelles), we have been in existence for 175 years as a free university and for 40 years as an independent Dutch-speaking university. In the meantime, we are not to be overlooked in the Flemish university landscape. As a fully-fledged university, we offer virtually all kinds of courses, spread out over eight faculties and two campuses: the main campus in Etterbeek and the medical campus in Jette, which is also the site of our UZ Brussels university hospital. Together, university and hospital have some 5,700 members of staff and a turnover of 500 million euros.



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I think that we are above all distinguishing ourselves from other universities through a number of values that we prize highly, such as critical thinking and free research, respect for the total person and a social commitment from a non-dogmatic humanistic perspective. With these values as a starting point, over the past decade we have helped to define a number of changes in society. We need only think of artificial insemination and care for the end of life. Another trump card that we are only too happy to play is our location in the capital of the country and of Europe. Brussels is a strong brand internationally, but Brussels offer also advantages to Flemish students that you do

not find in any other student city in our country. For example, where better to study the political sciences than at a stone's throw from the Rue de La Loi, in the shadow of the Chamber, the Senate and the Flemish, Brussels and European Parliament? Where better to study modern European languages than in a city where all these languages are normally spoken on the street? Or civil engineering in the centre of real estate? Or all economic courses in the economic heart of Belgium? Or sociology in a cosmopolitan city where there is abundant diversity?

This year once again we note strong growth in the number of new first year students. In total, we now have nearly 10,000 students. As I always say: the Vrije Universiteit Brussel is a medium-sized university. For that matter, our education invariably scores highly by the independent and strict inspection committees that monitor quality. But our research is also excellent. The Vrije Universiteit Brussel has more than 150 research groups, of which a number are among the very best in the world.

Can you shed some light on a few recent research and other projects that demonstrate the clout of the VUB as a scientific institution?

The Flemish Government wants to keep top researchers of international standard in Flanders through the making available of research means, the so-called Methusalem grants. Well, our university has four of them. This involves Prof. Danny Pipeleers with his diabetes research, Prof. Johan Schoukens with his advanced mathematic modelling techniques, Prof. Inge Liebaers and Prof. Karen Sermon with their groundbreaking research within reproductive medicine and Prof. Hugo Thienpont with his photonics research. Thanks to their perseverance and self-willed minds, they have placed the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Flanders on the scientific world map.



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ICAB (Incubatiecentrum Arsenal Brussel), the new incubator near the VUB-campus for ICT and engineering companies

How does the VUB distinguish itself from other universities: where is the added value?

Over the past year, we have worked hard at an ambitious future programme for the university, the General Strategic Plan 2009-2012. But before we began the elaboration of it – the plan has become 1,600 pages long – we once again set down clearly on paper just what we stand for. Our mission states: "The Vrije Universiteit Brussel is a fully-fledged, high quality, socially engaged and internationally oriented university in Brussels."



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Vrije Universiteit Brussel campus at Etterbeek