

Technology transfer as the gateway to China

K.U.LEUVEN PRESENTS SUCCESSFUL MODEL FOR RESEARCH VALORISATION IN SHANGHAI

LUDO MEYVIS

As part of Flemish Brabant's broader mission to China, a delegation from K.U.Leuven visited Shanghai, Chengdu and Beijing in September. K.U.Leuven and Leuven Research and Development (LRD) presented the successful Leuven model for research valorisation and technology transfer at the world exhibition in Shanghai.

The Leuven delegation, which included Vice Rector Bart De Moor, Managing Director Koen Debackere, Paul Van Dun of LRD and Bart Hendrickx of the International Office, primarily focussed on co-operation with Chinese universities and scientific institutions with respect to technology transfer.

"When it comes to relations with China, it is important not to be naïve," Vice Rector DE MOOR says. "In past encounters, it struck me that the Chinese really have very little to learn with regard to research and education. People who work at Chinese universities today have extensive international experience, have PhDs from the best American universities and they know what it's like to be a research university of high international standing. But I also discovered that when technology transfer was

discussed during presentations, they pricked up their ears. Through further discussions, I realised that this is somewhat of a blind spot in China. And this just happens to be one of the spearheads of K.U.Leuven. Our LRD really is at the international top, and we have developed an excellent reputation with respect to research valorisation and technology transfer."

"It is not particularly surprising that China still needs to grow in this area because it is a very complex one, which demands that numerous preconditions be met. For example, you need a 'compliant' legal framework and one which places the property rights of university discoveries with the universities themselves, and not with the government. Civil servant X will probably not found a spin-off company... It is also a question of culture. Founding a spin-

off from within the university is by no means self-evident in China yet: you need shareholders, you need to find capital, etc. These things are perfectly normal here, but that is not the case in China, yet."

"It is also significant that though China recognises the great potential of the knowledge-based society, its economy was and is still primarily based on a production industry. The idea that knowledge has value, and that you can intensively participate in a global economy through this knowledge – via tech-transfer – is relatively new to the Chinese. There is thus still space for development, and on this trip, we made an excellent impression by sharing Leuven's experiences in this field."

"They are especially interested in 'best practices', of which Leuven has several. Just think, for

example, of the assets of LRD, the IOF (*Industrial Research Fund, ed.*), university-wide courses on entrepreneurship, the long list of spin-offs, the portfolio of patents and industrial contacts, etc. The Chinese are also looking for opportunities for formation; short sessions about topics like intellectual property, for example, a concept that is not as well developed in China as it is here."

"It is my impression that through technology transfer, K.U.Leuven has a platform with which we can make significant headway in China. I think the 'scouting phase', which is simply unavoidable, will be relatively short and will soon be followed by the first concrete initiatives. We will soon sign a Memory of Understanding with the Yangtze Delta Regional Research Institute, one of the three mega-sites for technology transfer led by Tsinghua University, with which K.U.Leuven already co-operates closely. In fact, the institute illustrates how seriously China takes this: it is an enormous institute, with a site that covers dozens of hectares in the richest region of China. It is directed by Mr. Hu, the son of the Chinese president himself. In China, this is a clear indication that they mean business."

"By strengthening our ties with respect to technology transfer – and everything leads me to suspect that this will be successful – K.U.Leuven will be able to establish a vital relationship with China, which will of course also be important with respect to exchange and co-operation concerning education and research. This may also enable us to launch a number of our spin-offs on the Chinese market, which would of course be an additional bonus. And perhaps we can also establish Chinese-Leuven joint ventures; joint spin-offs. We haven't reached that point yet of course, but I think we have taken a number of important steps in that direction."