

CHAPTER 4

ENTERPRISES



1

Business enterprise sector

Enterprises are of major importance within the STI system in Flanders. **6% of R&D** in Flanders was funded by the business enterprise sector in 2021. However, they are a very heterogeneous group. Most large companies are clearly innovation-active. Some of them have significant research budgets. Given the industrial texture in Flanders, most of these large enterprises belong to multinational groups, so that their research policy is not exclusively determined in Flanders.

Alongside the large, innovation-intensive companies, a group of **high-technology SMEs** has arisen in recent years and continues to grow steadily. Moreover, even though the large majority of SMEs do not conduct research directly, many of them outsource research to some extent, so that they can also be regarded as innovation-oriented.

According to the Community Innovation Survey (CIS) carried out in 2023, 75% of all companies (2020-2022) in Flanders can be called innovative (= had either product innovations, business process innovations and/or ongoing or abandoned innovation activities). Nevertheless, innovation continues to be **largely concentrated** in industry and large companies.

International comparisons demonstrate that the **share of people employed in (medium) high-tech industry and high-tech services** in Flanders is lower than the EU average (8.8% versus 9.9% for the EU-27 in 2023). The R&D activities (expenditure) within companies in Flanders are mainly focused on the following high-tech sectors (2023): chemicals and pharmaceuticals (NACE 19-21) account for 37% of total BERD (based on a sample); motion picture, video and TV production, computer programmes, engineering, and technical testing and analysis activities (NACE 58-63, 71-72) account for 24%. Machinery and transport (NACE 28-30) account for about 10% and information technology, electronic products, optical products and electrical equipment (NACE 26-27) account for about 7%.

2

Infrastructure and financial intermediaries

INCUBATOR IN THE PICTURE

BLUECHEM

BlueChem is the first incubator for sustainable chemistry in Belgium as well as the ideal location for start-ups and scale-ups to grow and innovate.

This unique public-private partnership brings industry, academics and government together with the common ambition to help start-ups and growth companies grow on an industrial scale. Open innovation and the mutual exchange of expertise make BlueChem the place to be for promising innovation, development and cutting-edge research.

BlueChem opened its doors in May 2020 at the eco-effective Blue Gate Antwerp business park, in the heart of one of the largest chemical clusters in the world. BlueChem is boosting promising innovations to create the chemistry of the future. Together with the pre-incubator BlueApp and the NextGen District in the Port of Antwerp, BlueChem forms Antwerp's innovative ecosystem for sustainable chemistry, which has been awarded by the European Enterprise Promotion Award (EEPA) in 2025.



In Flanders, several science parks, research parks, incubators and accelerators offer facilities for research-based young companies and innovative enterprises. Often, these are spin-off companies from a university or a PRO and are located close to the knowledge centre in question. In some cases, an incubator is specifically oriented towards a particular scientific area.

Universities and strategic research centres are increasingly able to professionally guide spin-off companies, e.g. with finding the appropriate CEO, financial structure, and administrative issues. An important trend is the establishment and elaboration of different types of incubators. An overview of **business centres and incubators** can be found at: <https://www.vlaio.be/en/guidance-advice/vlaio-supports-foreign-investors/finding-right-location>.

The various private risk capital funds providers in Flanders include the large banks in Belgium, and specific funds. There are more than 100 private risk capital funds active in Flanders. An overview of risk capital providers in Flanders is available at <https://www.vlaio.be/nl/begeleiding-advies/financiering/risicokapitaal>.

There also exist several funds that are linked to the Flemish universities or the strategic research centres. Examples of these are:

- › the **Gemma Frisius seed capital fund** (KU Leuven)
- › the multi-sector **Qbic Fund** (UGent, VUB, UA and VITO)
- › **Imec.xpand**, which focuses on hardware-driven nanotechnology innovations, with imec's unique expertise playing a decisive role in the company's success.

- › **Imec.iStart** offering coaching, support and infrastructure to (future) technology start-up companies
- › **V-Bio Ventures Fund (VIB)** investing in European start-up companies and young companies in biopharmaceuticals, diagnostics, and agricultural improvements. It was initially set up by the Flemish Government, which still holds a minority stake in the company.

It is noteworthy to mention the following initiatives:

- › **Business Angels Network Flanders (BAN Vlaanderen):** a platform in which starting or growing entrepreneurs seeking risk capital are matched with informal private investors, the so-called "business angels". The latter offer not only money but also their own know-how, experience and contacts. BAN Vlaanderen is a marketplace where demand and supply meet, rather than an investment fund.
- › **FINMIX:** a project from VLAIO aimed at companies with innovative challenges, growth ambitions or take-over plans, that use risk capital for their plans. It provides the possibility to these businesses to propose their plan to a panel of funding experts who will provide advice on the best funding mix. There are panel sessions focusing on specific sectors or themes, and there is also a session aimed at women entrepreneurs (FINMIX 4 females in cooperation with Vrouwennet vzw).
- › **The Flemish investment company PMV** finances without sector preference in promising Flemish enterprises with a solid business plan, from their earliest start through growth and internationalization. In addition to venture capital, PMV also offers financing solutions in the form of (a combination of) loans and guarantees.
- › **LRM** is a Flemish investment company that provides risk financing, loans and expertise available to companies and projects that contribute to prosperity and well-being in Limburg and Flanders.
- › **The Flanders Future Tech Fund** is a public early-stage financier that can award initial tickets of up to €5 million for early technology initiatives from the strategic research centers (SOCs), universities, Flemish spearhead clusters, and also from private parties. For strategic investments, the initial ticket can amount to a maximum of €25 million. One follow-on investment is possible in the form of a convertible loan. This amounts to a maximum of €2.5 million for 'standard files' and up to €12.5 million for strategic files.



© Sigrid Spinnox

3

Collaboration: innovative networks and research-business links

Collaboration is an important aspect of Flemish innovation policy. It enables companies and knowledge centres to develop their internal know-how and allows them to tackle common technological issues efficiently, by using a shared platform for the demand and supply of R&D and other innovative matters.

3.1

Cluster policy

On 4 March 2016, the Flemish government approved the decree regulating support for innovation clusters in Flanders. The objective of the cluster policy is to unlock untapped economic potential and to increase the competitiveness of Flemish companies through active and sustainable cooperation between actors. The policy focuses on partnerships between Flemish companies. These companies are characterised by their growth ambitions, a high level of innovation awareness and their international outlook. In addition, they must be open to cooperation with other companies and knowledge centres, both for the realisation of their individual business objectives and for contributing to an increase in the competitiveness of a large group of Flemish companies.

Within the cluster, a cluster organisation acts as the facilitator of the network and the representative of the cluster members. Cluster organisations can be financially supported by the Flemish government for the implementation of their role as facilitators. With a support percentage of 50%, the companies should annually collect an equivalent amount of co-financing for the operation of the cluster organisation. In addition to the financial support, to the cluster organisation, the Flemish Government earmarks a dedicated budget in the overall innovation investment fund (FIO). With this earmarked budget collaborative innovation projects are supported in order to reach the objectives of the competitiveness program set up with and for the cluster members.

The **spearhead clusters** fit in with Flanders Smart Specialization Strategy. Flanders has seven spearhead clusters:



Blue cluster with an emphasis on sustainable economic activities related to the North Sea and beyond. The cluster is active in (1) coastal protection and mineral resources, (2) renewable energy and fresh water production, (3) maritime connectivity, (4) sustainable food production and marine biotechnology, (5) blue tourism and (6) ocean pollution.

www.blauwecluster.be



Flanders' Food in the domain of agro-food. The cluster has two knowledge-driven strategic objectives (lead in knowledge and lead to knowledge) and two business-driven strategic objectives (accelerate efficient & effective innovation and cross/create value chains). The knowledge-driven strategic goals will focus on (1) World Class Food Production, (2) Resilient & Sustainable Agrifood Systems and (3) Personalized Food Products & Healthy Diets.

www.flandersfood.com



ENT.A is the Flemish innovation cluster that helps companies, organisations and knowledge institutions create state-of-the-art experiences, and connects them to the future through foresight analyses, training programs, international opportunities, and robust innovation pathways.

ENT.A aims to set an example across Europe in stimulating innovation within the entertainment landscape by constantly pushing boundaries. By fostering a culture of experimentation, international collaboration and continuous learning, ENT.A inspires their members to think boldly, to explore new territories and to create pioneering solutions that shape the future of experience.

www.entertainmentassociatie.be



Flanders Logistics cluster (VIL) in the domain of specialised logistics. Its programming is centred around four main themes: (1) digitization with three sub-themes: smart technology, business models and data management, (2) sustainability themes like CO2 reduction and energy efficiency objectives for logistics in smart cities, circular and sharing economy, infrastructure (3) ambition 'Flanders gateways', i.e. Flanders as a global connected trading partner and (4) omni-channel distribution systems for various application.

www.vil.be



MEDVIA and flanders.bio have joined forces to become **Biovia**: the new health innovation cluster for Flanders, uniting human and planetary health into one vibrant ecosystem.

Biovia is an industry-driven organisation with some 400 members and partners, from companies, research institutes, universities, hospitals, service providers, investors and government. Biovia brings together all sectors at the crossroads of health innovation – medical biotech, medtech, digital health, agtech and industrial biotech. Because at Biovia, we recognize that all health is connected – people, animals, plants and planet.

www.biovia.be



Catalisti in the domain of sustainable chemistry. The cluster has four main innovation programmes: "Renewable Chemicals", "Sidestream Valorisation", "Process Intensification and Optimisation" and "Advanced Sustainable Products".

www.catalisti.be



Flux50 in the domain of energy (Smart grid), five innovator zones have been selected: energy harbours, micro grids, multi-energy solutions for districts, energy cloud platforms, intelligent renovation.

www.flux50.com



© Adobestock

3.2

Local and thematic initiatives

Examples of **place-based initiatives**, driven by one or more knowledge actor(s), and supported by various public stakeholders are Leuven Inc., Leuven Mindgate, or Ghent Bio-Energy Valley (GBEV) and BBEU (Bio-Base Europe).

Thematic or sector-oriented organisations and networks

exist in a broad variety. Examples include the FlandersBio network (life sciences – biopharmaceuticals, medical technologies or agricultural / industrial biotech products), Agoria Flanders (federation for the technology industry), MedTech Flanders (medical technology). The “Agoria International Business” helps technology companies increase their international market share and profitability by identifying business opportunities abroad.

HYDROGEN as a thematic priority

The Government of Flanders has put increasing emphasis on hydrogen as a future energy source, both driven by the presence of a significant hydrogen value chain in Flanders, as well as the presence of companies that will need hydrogen for their transition to a net zero industry. The hydrogen community in Flanders is organised in the “Waterstof Industrie Cluster (WIC)”, a strong collaboration of companies, research institutes and government agencies and coordinated by WaterstofNet, the Flemish hydrogen knowledge and collaboration platform. They join forces on pilot projects, studies and project consortia along the hydrogen value chain to establish a complete hydrogen ecosystem in Flanders. In line with the Flemish policy vision on hydrogen the WIC published “An industrial Flemish Hydrogen Strategy 2025-2030” in December 2020.

Flemish universities and knowledge centres are conducting groundbreaking research in hydrogen technologies. An overview (updated yearly) of Flemish research groups and their activities can be found in the publication “Hydrogen Research in Flanders (January 2023)” on www.waterstofnet.eu/en/knowledge-centre/publications.

In July 2023 the Port of Antwerp-Bruges, North Sea Port and Port of Ostend have officially been recognised as a ‘Hydrogen Valley’ at the European level. That status is granted to a geographical area that houses a complete hydrogen value chain – from production to distribution, storage and local end-use in different sectors. The Flemish Hydrogen Ports Valley is coordinated by WaterstofNet.

www.waterstofnet.eu/en



FLANDERS SPACE as a thematic initiative

Alongside hydrogen, the Government of Flanders also supports the development of a strong space economy through Flanders Space, a programme and cluster initiative supported by VLAIO. Flanders Space aims to give Flemish companies, knowledge organisations and young talent opportunities to work with space data and space infrastructure, and to translate these assets into new products, services and applications. The initiative addresses both established space actors and companies from other sectors that want to explore how satellite data and space-enabled services can create value in their own activities, including for public authorities seeking solutions for societal challenges.

Flanders Space focuses on four complementary pillars: attracting young talent, supporting competitiveness and entrepreneurship, providing R&D funding and science communication. In practice, this translates into support for feasibility studies, the development of prototypes and innovative technologies and concepts, as well as targeted actions to stimulate Flemish space entrepreneurship, including support for space start-ups. In addition, the programme offers opportunities such as Frank De Winne (post)doctoral mandates and internships to help STEM graduates build a sustainable career in the Flemish space industry, while communication activities highlight how space data and infrastructure can contribute to solving societal challenges.

www.flandersspace.be



EDTECH/STATION as a thematic initiative

Another thematic initiative supported by VLAIO is edtech/station, a hub that strengthens the Flemish educational technology (EdTech) ecosystem and accelerates digital transformation and innovation in learning technologies. The initiative responds to the strong growth of the EdTech sector and to the need for technology transfer from research to industry in domains such as simulation and training, AR/VR/XR, high-performance synchronous communication, adaptive learning and AI. It targets EdTech companies delivering solutions to the education sector as well as to companies in the context of lifelong learning, and connects them with researchers, schools and companies that want to apply these technologies in a variety of learning environments.

In practice, edtech/station supports start-ups, scale-ups and established companies through an ecosystem approach that stimulates cross-fertilisation between EdTech members, research groups and relevant organisations, and by building links with international sister hubs. The hub organises matchmaking around collaboration opportunities with national and international research institutes, offers visibility to EdTech actors and solutions, and provides a platform through a broad range of activities such as workshops, bootcamps, information sessions, trainings and event participation.

www.edtechstation.be

3.3

Collective (research) centres

Collective research centres are recognised as a scientific organisation by BELSPO (and eligible for the scheme of reduced social contributions on researchers' salaries). Their main activities include collective research, various services of a scientific or technical nature (provided individually to their members), dissemination of technical information and training. The collective centres were founded after WWII by **the Belgian business federations**, usually by way of an association, and over the years several of other institutes have gained a similar status. The target groups of their applied research activities are either defined by sector or by theme. In addition, they often participate in European, federal and Flemish research programmes and carry out self-generated research to maintain their overall levels of knowledge and expertise.

These centres conduct (contract) research at the request of individual companies. These centres, including the equivalent organisations, are:

- › Belgian Institute for Wood Technology and the Wood Training Centre (WOOD);
- › Belgian Welding Institute (BWI);
- › Belgian Research Centre for the Cement Industry (CRIC);
- › Belgian Road Research Centre (BRRC);
- › Scientific and Technical Service Centre for the Belgian Textile Industry (Centexbel);
- › Belgian Building Research Institute (BBRI);
- › Scientific and Technological Research Centre for Diamond (WTOCD);
- › Collective Centre for the Belgian Technology Industry (SIRRIS), which includes several sub-sectors (e.g. "Aeronautics, Space, Security & Defence Industries");
- › Coatings Research Institute (CORI);
- › Research Centre for of certification and standardisation (CRIG- OCCN);
- › Belgian Ceramic Research Centre (BCRC) (includes ceramics, glass and bricks industry);
- › Metallurgic Research Centre (CRM) (for ferro and non-ferro metals);
- › Tecnolec / Volta (electrical business).

3.4

Research – business links

The Flemish Government has developed a number of initiatives to **increase the valorisation** of research results, to better diffuse technology, and to strengthen the direct links between companies seeking to innovate and researchers from higher education institutions. **Support** is available to companies, institutions, networks and private individuals (researchers).

Other examples of current measures towards business include:

- › **Baekeland mandates and innovation mandates** allowing researchers to conduct research with a specific business-oriented purpose in close relation with the business,
- › support via the **TETRA Fund** aimed at applied-research projects,
- › the support for the universities of applied sciences and arts to professionalise the knowledge diffusion towards SME's "**Blikopener**" ("Mind opener"),

› **'Collective Research & Development and Collective Knowledge Dissemination/Transfer (COOCK+)**' is a policy instrument that focuses on groups of companies, with the aim of valorising (basic) research results by accelerating the introduction of technology and/or knowledge,

› **"Proeftuinen" (Living Laboratories, or test beds)**, were set up in various domains. These are structured test environments in which organisations can test innovative technologies, products, services and concepts, using a representative sample of individuals, who are used as testers in their normal living and working environments. Current Living Labs are active in the fields of Industry 4.0, Circular Economy and Smart cities.

The measures geared towards knowledge institutes are discussed under chapter 3.

4

Business expenditure on R&D

Business Expenditures on R&D (BERD) represent 8.915 billion euro, of which the **chemical and pharmaceutical** sector led the way with 37% (2023). Other main performers were motion pictures, video and TV production, computer programmes, engineering, technical testing and analysis activities. The top-50 R&D-active companies jointly represent about 51% of all R&D expenditures in Flanders. Of all total foreign investments in Flanders in 2024 (representing 5.40 billion euro), about 27% of foreign investments in 2024 took place in the R&D sector.

In **2023**, the R&D intensity in the business sector was 2.50%, a slight increase in comparison with 2022 (2.48%). Flanders therefore ranks higher than the EU-27 average and the Netherlands, Finland, Germany and Austria. Sweden, Japan, the USA and Korea score higher than Flanders.

For more information on BERD, see Annex III.



© Shutterstock