

CHAPTER 5

CITIZENS



1

Science communication

Since 1994 the popularisation of science, technology and innovation has been considered an essential part of the STI policy in Flanders and is implemented in a Science Communication Policy Plan. The objectives are to strengthen the scientific and technological potential of all citizens, and in particular of youngsters and other (hard to reach) target groups. Too few young people opt for science and technology disciplines in education and in labour. Increasing the scientific literacy of society at large is also an important goal.

Several **science information actors** contribute to the science communication policy: the Science Centre Technopolis (www.technopolis.be), the Science Communication Expertise

Centres at the Universities and Universities of applied sciences and arts (see Chapter 3), RVO-society (www.rvo-society.be), and several others are involved. Their specific activities are posted on the Science Communication Agenda hosted by Eos Wetenschap (www.eoswetenschap.be).

Media actors such as the science popularisation publisher EOS (www.eos.be), Journalismfund.eu, [Het Geluidshuis](http://HetGeluidshuis) and [University of Flanders](http://UniversityofFlanders) are also involved.

The general public can meet and engage with scientists, science educators and science communicators in a wide variety of inspiring settings – from **science festivals**, **science cafés** and **science shops** to major events such as [Maker Faire Gent](http://MakerFaireGent), Scienceville and [the Day of Science](http://theDayofScience), among many others.



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2

Citizen science

Since 2018 **calls for Citizen Science project proposals** are launched regularly in collaboration with Scivil, the knowledge centre for Citizen Science. Scientific projects rely on the active participation of citizens for data gathering and data processing.

Researchers from universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and research centres initiate the projects. They collaborate with trained science communicators to reach and to engage the public.

New approaches will be explored whereby sandbox environments will be created by opening up data from knowledge institutes and companies, so that entrepreneurial citizens and small companies can develop and test new solutions.

In 2021, SciMingo, one of the science policy actors, launched with support of the Flemish Government a science communication academy where young PhD students and scientists can acquire the necessary science communication skills in order to strike the right balance between engaging the public about their research without compromising themselves nor their research.

3

STEM-initiatives

Attracting more people towards STEM-careers still remains a challenge for Flanders. In 2024, 21,6% of the total number of degrees awarded in higher education were degrees in mathematics, science or a technological discipline. This is a slight increase compared to the previous year. In 2025 the most recent edition of the STEM Monitor (reporting annually on the education indicators linked to the STEM-agenda 2030) was published by the Department of Education and Training. In secondary education, 35.50% of pupils were in a STEM course of study in school year 2024-2025 with an increase in girls in technical STEM courses and a decrease in girls in vocational STEM courses. The number of pupils in STEM in dual learning continues to rise, with a total of 4012 pupils in 2024-2025. 41.50 percent of all pupils leaving secondary education graduated with a STEM diploma in school year 2023-2024, which is a slight decrease compared to previous years.

To stimulate youngsters to choose for STEM-study paths and STEM-careers, the STEM Action Plan 2012-2020 was implemented by the Flemish government. In 2021, a new action plan was implemented, called the STEM-Agenda 2030. The STEM Agenda 2030 is focusing on attracting more people towards STEM courses and careers, on STEM specialists and on the general strengthening of STEM competences in society at large (STEM literacy). The STEM Agenda 2030 is structured around 4 strategic objectives:

9. Everyone in society is aware of the importance of STEM competences for their future.
10. Anyone with an interest and talent in STEM can easily find the way to a suitable STEM study program that offers security in a changing future.
11. STEM education and training responds to the evolutions and transitions in business, research and society, both now and in the future.
12. STEM competences are used as much as possible according to the needs, developments and transitions in business, research and society.

To support businesses in their commitment to playing a role in this issue, a STEMhub was established at VLAIO in 2024. The STEMhub informs, inspires and supports companies committed to nurturing STEM talent. In this way, local ecosystems are strengthened by linking businesses to schools, leisure organisations, knowledge institutions, local authorities, and so on.

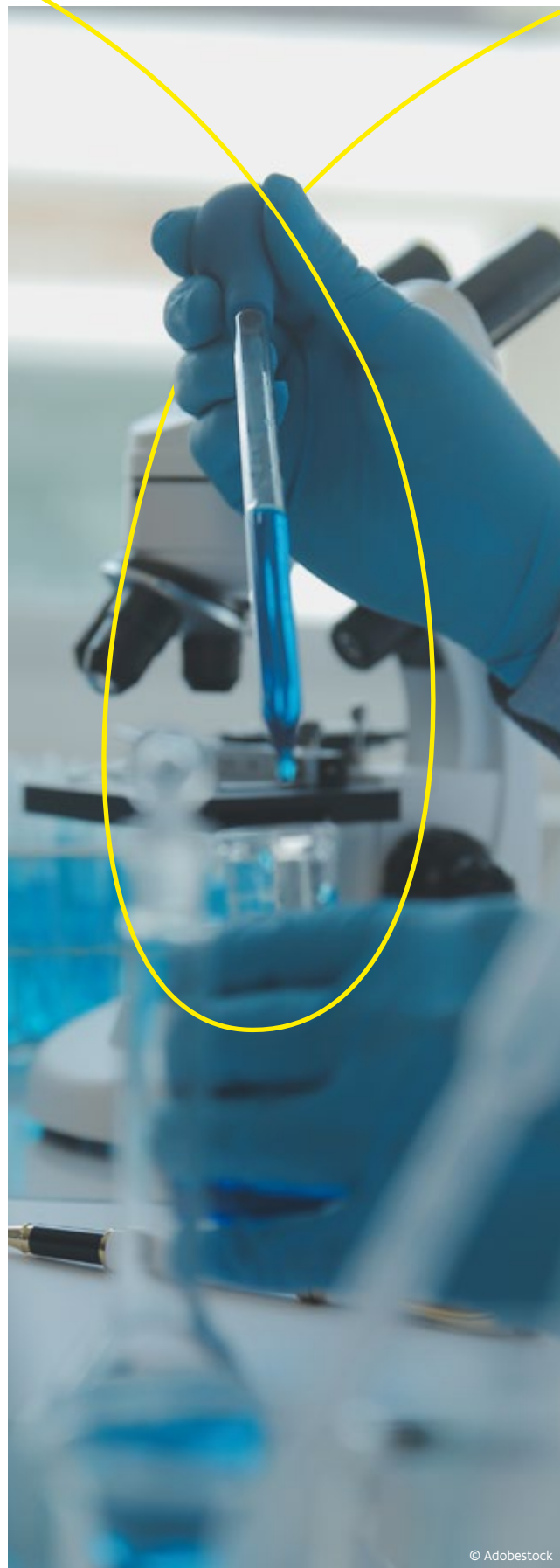
Besides STEM-Hub VLAIO also supports the ecosystem STEM in leisure time to give children opportunities outside school hours to have positive experiences with science and technology. The ambition is to have a high-quality range of STEM activities accessible in every municipality. The number of organisations that work together with VLAIO to organize STEM activities outside school hours has increased from 50 in 2019 to 169 in 2025.

4

Science careers

Working as a researcher could be made more attractive by the development of **more transparent career paths and specific programmes to attract foreign talents or externally active Belgian (Flemish) researchers** that offer perspectives. Flanders' ambition to be a successful knowledge society can only be realized if it continues to invest in high-level research and good researchers.

Apart from the regular funding channels, such as the Special Research Fund (BOF) or the grants, fellowships and research projects from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), several **specific initiatives** were developed to encourage excellent researchers and support these in a long-term career path. These include budgets for the "tenure track mandates" that lead to a position within the ZAP (Senior Academic Staff) and Methusalem (long term support for excellent researchers), worth a total of about 31,4 million euro in 2026, as well as the Odysseus programme, a bi-annual brain gain initiative. Moreover, the Flemish government supports the training on career development and transferable skills of PhD students and other young researchers through funding of the Doctoral Schools at the Flemish universities within the framework of the OJO-support (support of young researchers), worth 6,3 million euro in 2026.



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5

Quadruple helix model

In line with the ambitions to implement the quadruple helix model, the current government has asked VARIO for advice on a method for better implying citizens and civil society in the development and deployment of policy initiatives. VARIO has addressed this question in its advisory report 16 'Involving citizens in science and innovation policy' and the accompanying background report. It thus goes further than involving citizens in science and innovation, to which Flanders is already highly committed (see above).

In comparison, Flanders has been investing less in involving citizens in policy. VARIO has emphasized that good communication about government decisions and initiatives to the public is pivotal for that. Furthermore, the council has pointed out the importance of evidence-informed policy to let the general interest of citizens take precedence and thus

strengthen support and confidence in the policy. The 'data' for evidence-informed policy can be collected via studies, in a broad sense of the word or via co-creation, such as in living labs or in citizen science. VARIO advised to stimulate co-creation in the quadruple helix, and to take away existing hurdles.

VARIO is not in favor of a last form of involving citizens, as providers of direct input for science and innovation policy, this should happen only exceptionally, with expert citizens or citizens organised in Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). The latter is already done in Flanders as CSOs are traditionally represented in advisory councils, mainly on a local level, and more recently for example also in the sounding board group of the Moonshot and the Climate leap (Klimaat sprong) programmes. In this context VARIO asked to look beyond the 'usual suspects', and at newer forms of civic organisations.





6

Flanders Technology & Innovation

Flanders Technology & Innovation

The government of Flanders launched Flanders Technology & Innovation (FTI) in October 2022. The intention is to bridge the gap between Flanders' cutting-edge technology, which is highly regarded internationally, and segments of the population who have a gloomy outlook on the future. Government, companies, knowledge centres and citizens will focus on six domains:

1. Energy transition
2. health care
3. lifelong learning
4. data
5. mobility
6. media and entertainment.

The FTI acronym has been used before in Flanders and is a householdname for generations. The FTI technology fairs, which took place between 1984 and 1999, were an inspiration to many and the launching platform for knowledge centers such as imec and VIB.

With the new Flanders Technology and Innovation, the government of Flanders is now launching a contemporary project and a promotional campaign on innovation and technology.

The Flemish Government is convinced that technology can generate progress and therefore there is ample room for optimism. With the slogan "Update yourself", the initiative encourages citizens, entrepreneurs and organisations to actively engage with the technologies shaping our future.

Flanders Technology & Innovation Festival – Ambitions that Shape the Future

In 2026, the Flanders Technology & Innovation Festival sets out to position Flanders as a leading innovation hub—both nationally and internationally. With a bold vision and a hands-on approach, the festival brings together technology, entrepreneurship, and society to inspire meaningful progress.

Spanning 30 days the festival will activate **7 regional cities** alongside one central flagship event. Together, these experiences are expected to attract over **25,000 visitors per city** and more than **95,000 attendees** at the central festival—creating a powerful ecosystem of ideas, talent, and opportunity.

At its core, the festival aims to **cultivate a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship**. Through immersive, high-impact experiences, it enhances the international visibility of Flanders while strengthening its reputation as a dynamic and future-focused region.

The festival also plays a key role in **amplifying the Flemish start-up and scale-up ecosystem**, embedding innovation and entrepreneurship as fundamental societal values. By showcasing cutting-edge research and breakthrough technologies, it inspires the broader public and fuels a strong STEM-oriented mindset across education, research, and business.

Beyond inspiration, the festival is designed for impact. It **connects SMEs with the technologies and challenges of tomorrow**, accelerates knowledge exchange, and highlights regional innovation hubs that drive sustainable growth and development.

With a commitment to **biennial editions through at least 2030**, the Flanders Technology & Innovation Festival is not just an event—it is a long-term movement to shape the future of innovation in Flanders and beyond. The programme is implemented by VLAIO, the Flemish agency responsible for fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.

