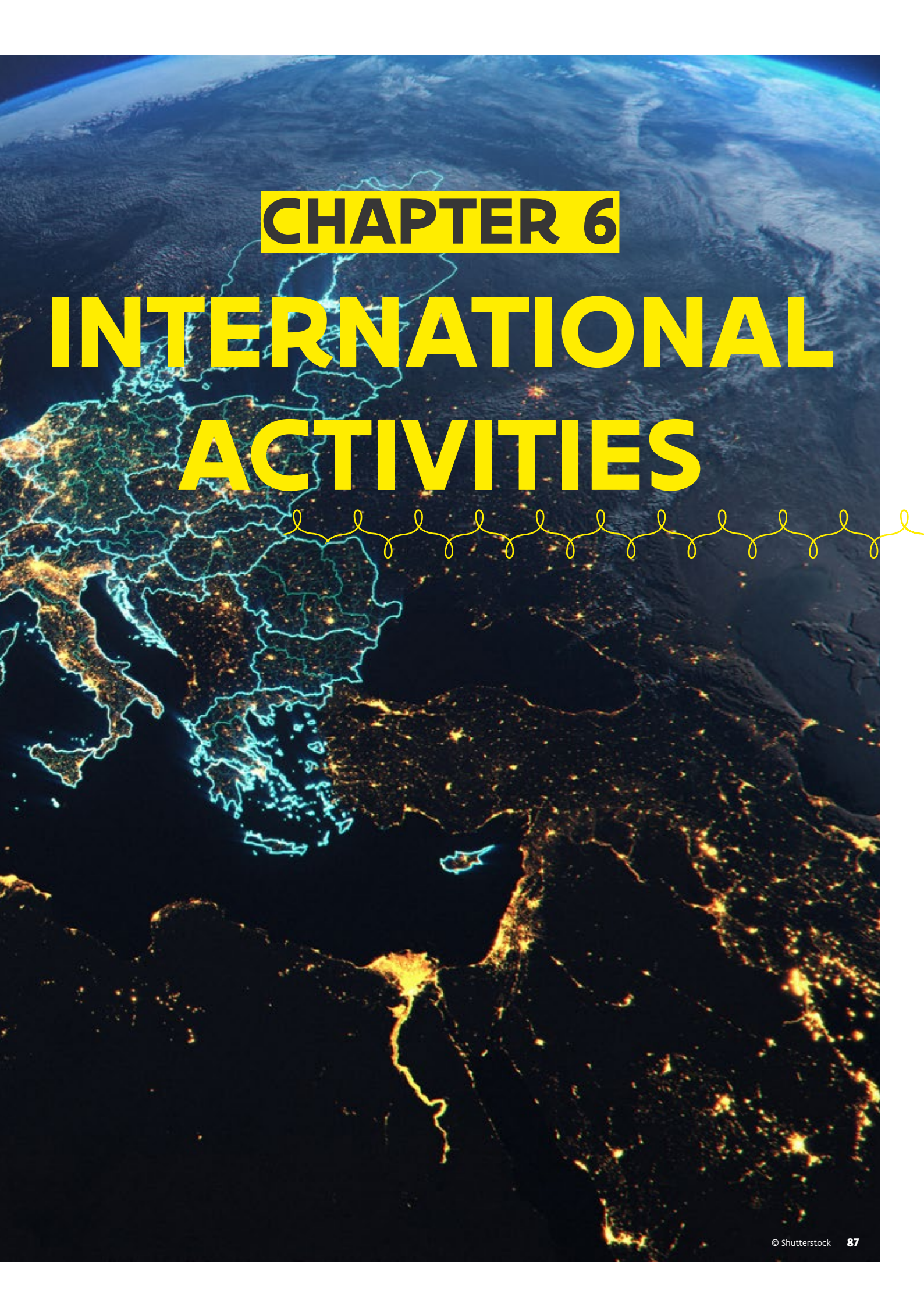


A satellite night view of Europe and surrounding regions. The landmasses are dark, with city lights and urban areas glowing in bright yellow and orange. The borders of countries are highlighted with a glowing cyan line. The surrounding oceans are dark blue. The text 'CHAPTER 6' is overlaid on the top left in a yellow box.

CHAPTER 6

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

A decorative horizontal line consisting of a series of connected, stylized loops or 'S' shapes, drawn in a bright yellow color, extending across the width of the page below the title.

1

EU-level

Flanders is autonomous in exercising its own competences internationally, in line with the principle of *in foro interno, in foro externo*: the authority competent for a policy area internally is also competent to represent that area externally. This has been the case since 1993, when the Belgian Communities and Regions became able to execute their competencies at the EU and international policy level. Where a Belgian position is required, it is prepared through coordination meetings chaired by the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, in which the competent federal and federated entities agree on a common position that is subsequently validated at political level.

Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) policy is one of the competence areas covered by this autonomy. In practice, this means that the international aspects of STI cover a wide range of activities and institutions, embedded at the public, semi-public and private level.

In addition, the various public, semi-public and private actors that are interested or eligible can initiate their own policy initiatives and programmes at the international level.

In Flanders, a substantial effort has been made to internationalise STI policy. More concretely, this policy is shaped by the preparation and follow-up of policy initiatives at the bilateral, interregional, intergovernmental, EU and international policy levels, including the OECD and the UN. The main policy focus is on the EU level.

This chapter 6 distinguishes between policy preparation and follow-up on the one hand, and policy implementation on the other. For EU programmes, the dividing line is generally situated at the publication of the work programmes by the European Commission. Policy preparation and follow-up, including participation in working parties and programme committees, is primarily carried out by the WEWIS Department. Policy implementation focuses on supporting Flemish actors in preparing and submitting project proposals, with NCP Flanders acting as a key facilitator.

Flanders strives to align its R&D&I priorities as much as possible with the priorities defined at EU level regarding the grand challenges, the European Research Area, the European Semester, Horizon Europe and other European programmes, such as the Digital Europe Programme.

Such goals can be achieved by striving towards excellence, increasing budgets, facilitating researcher mobility and participating in EU and international cooperation programmes and networks. This is particularly relevant for the future prosperity of Flanders, given its open economy and the high proportion of international companies active in R&D.

Indeed, in addition to funding from the Flemish and federal authorities, research and innovation actors also receive significant amounts from various EU programmes (mainly Horizon Europe, the future European Competitiveness Fund and, to some extent, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Defence Fund (EDF)).

1.1

Policy preparation and follow-up

In the ministerial meetings of the Council of the European Union concerning research and innovation policy, Belgium is represented by its Communities and Regions, which take turns according to a rotation system agreed between the entities, while the federal level acts as assessor. As a result, Flanders is one of the authorities directly involved in the preparation of decisions within the Council, and when its turn in the rotation comes around, it acts as Belgium's spokesperson, allowing it to help shape the common position that is drawn up jointly by consensus.

Meetings of the Council Working Party on Research are attended by the Flemish attaché for research and innovation, who is assigned to, and is an integral part of, the Belgian Permanent Representation to the EU.

Principal fields of action include the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, the European Research Area (ERA) and all related R&D&I matters in the broadest possible sense, including international R&I cooperation under the EU Global Approach, ESFRI and related initiatives.

The domain of digital policy is becoming ever more important to innovation, as this field also governs the development, deployment and use of cutting-edge technologies. These include artificial intelligence, data technologies, virtual worlds, high-speed connectivity and more. To more closely follow and interact with EU digital policy, the department has seconded a part-time attaché at the Permanent Representation of Belgium to the EU to follow and report on EU telecommunications and digital-policy dossiers.

Active involvement in the EU's research and innovation policies includes:

- › Preparation and follow-up of ministerial decisions within the EU Competitiveness Council, as well as relevant EU telecommunications and digital-policy dossiers;
- › The EU's Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programmes: preparation of the programme themes, involvement as programme committee members in Horizon Europe and Digital Europe, participation in the ERA networks, and other support actions;
- › Preparation and participation in the meetings of ERAC and the ERA Forum, which advise the European Commission, the Council and the EU Member States on research and innovation policy;
- › Participation in the bilateral meetings between the Commission and Belgium for the European Semester (Fact Finding Mission);
- › Participation in various EU initiatives in the field of R&D&I, such as ESFRI (international large research infrastructure) and the EIT (European Institute of Innovation and Technology);
- › Contributions to, or revisions of, reports and consultations involving the European Commission in the field of scientific research and innovation, such as the Flemish and Belgian National Reform Programmes for the European Semester, the various ERA reports and the EC/OECD STI Policies report;
- › Active involvement in the discussions and preparations for the programmes under the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034, such as the 10th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and the European Competitiveness Fund.



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Einstein Telescope – Flemish Policy Priority

note: The Einstein Telescope is a strategic government priority with dedicated funding. It is therefore presented here under policy preparation, and its operational follow-up (via WEWIS/FWO) is described in section 1.3.

Flanders plays a central role in the bid to host the Einstein Telescope (ET) in the Meuse–Rhine Euroregion (border area of Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany). The project is a priority for the Flemish Government, which has earmarked €500 million for construction of the detector. This is complemented by investment in scientific research via IRI, the programme operations of ET-Flanders science communication, valorisation and feasibility studies.

What is the Einstein Telescope (ET)?

- › Underground facility: A gigantic gravitational-wave detector, planned at a depth of 250–300 metres.
- › Triangular design: The observatory consists of three detector arms, each 10 kilometres long.
- › Scientific mission: To study black holes, neutron stars, dark matter and dark energy, and the Universe shortly after the Big Bang.
- › Objective: Using lasers and mirrors, it will measure extremely small ripples in spacetime: gravitational waves originating from cosmic events such as the merger of black holes and neutron stars, as well as the Big Bang itself.

Key facts

- › Location: The Meuse–Rhine Euroregion has subsurface conditions well suited to building this large-scale tunnel complex. The wider area hosts an impressive ecosystem of knowledge institutions and high-tech companies.
- › Impact: A recent study (February 2025) commissioned by the Flemish Government shows that the project could generate up to €1.5 billion in added value and lead to net productivity growth, peaking at 0.22% in 2041.
- › Innovation ecosystem: The aim is to create an 'ET Valley', building on the high-tech cluster already present in the Eindhoven–Leuven–Aachen triangle.
- › Funding: Construction is estimated at €2.9 billion; Flanders has already earmarked €500 million. To date, Flanders has also invested €36 million in scientific research, feasibility studies, valorisation and science communication.

Status in 2026

- › Candidate sites: The Meuse–Rhine Euroregion (tri-border area near the Voerstreek), Sardinia (Italy) and Saxony (Germany) are the official candidates.
- › Decision: The final site selection is expected in mid-2027.
- › Timeline: If the decision is positive, construction will start in 2028, with the ambition to be operational by 2040.



1.2

Policy implementation

A major source of R&I budget lies at the EU level, through Flemish participation in EU programmes that complement national and regional funding.

The main instruments in which Flemish actors participate are described below.

1.2.1

EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (Horizon Europe)

The Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (Horizon Europe) is the European Union's main funding instrument for research and innovation. Through competitive calls for proposals, it funds transnational research and innovation projects, partnerships and infrastructures involving universities, research institutions, companies and public authorities across Europe and beyond. Its overarching aim is to strengthen the EU's scientific and technological base, boost innovation and competitiveness, and address major societal and global challenges.

Framework programmes have been implemented since 1984 and cover a period of several years. Since 2021, the ninth Framework Programme, Horizon Europe, has been active. The programme is organised around three pillars – Excellent Science, Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness, and Innovative Europe – complemented by a fourth part dedicated to Widening Participation and Strengthening the European Research Area. Participation data show that actors in Flanders participate strongly: with a financial return of 3.33%, Flanders scores above the expected level.

KU Leuven is a frontrunner in Flanders and in Europe, particularly within the Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness pillar. KU Leuven and Ghent University rank 1st and 5th respectively in the European top 10 of academic participants. The top 10 Flemish participants in terms of number of projects and budget are: KU Leuven, Ghent University, imec, VUB, VITO, University of Antwerp, VIB, ILVO, VLIZ, and Bio Base Europe Pilot Plant.

The overall results for the Framework Programmes show that the Flemish R&I ecosystem excels in fundamental and strategic research, with strong participation in the European Research Council and in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). In terms of applied science, the results show a clear scientific specialisation in fields related to health, digital technologies, and agriculture and the bioeconomy.

Under Horizon Europe (2021–2027), European partnerships form an important component. They are divided into three types: co-programmed partnerships, co-funded partnerships and institutionalised partnerships, such as Joint Undertakings or EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities.

The core principle is that Member States can achieve more by collaborating and pooling their resources than by acting independently. Flemish actors participate in these partnerships with funding from FWO, VLAIO or through their own resources. In total, the Flemish government contributes around €218 million in cash to the Horizon Europe partnerships.

1.2.2

Digital Europe Programme

The Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL) is an EU funding programme launched in 2021 to reinforce Europe's strategic digital capacities and support the deployment and uptake of digital technologies by businesses, citizens and public administrations. It complements Horizon Europe by focusing less on research and more on implementation, scaling and market uptake. With an overall budget of over €8.1 billion for 2021-2027, it is particularly relevant for the WEWIS Department given its links with digital transformation, innovation, industrial competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

The Digital Europe Programme supports the following key capacity areas:

- › High-Performance Computing;
- › AI Continent (Artificial Intelligence, data and cloud, including the European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs);
- › Cybersecurity;
- › Semiconductors, through the Chips for Europe Initiative;
- › Advanced Digital Skills;
- › The wide use of digital technologies and interoperability.

These priorities are implemented through successive work programmes and calls, including the 2025-2027 Digital Europe work programme and separate arrangements for cybersecurity, high-performance computing and chips. The programme is applied in strategically important sectors and policy areas for Flanders, such as manufacturing, mobility, agriculture, health and public services, and has strong links with the Flemish Artificial Intelligence and Cybersecurity Policy Agendas and broader digital R&D priorities.

A major Flemish-European investment in this context is the IC Pilot Line (NanoIC), the largest pilot line for advanced semiconductor technology in Europe and the largest Flemish-linked investment in this field. Flanders also participates in European Testing and Experimentation Facilities for Smart Cities & Communities and Agrifood, and Flemish actors are involved in sectoral European data spaces and related initiatives. Flanders is further aligning with the renewed EDIH network with support for the Flemish EDIH 'FAITH', and with the European AI infrastructure ecosystem through the AI Factory Antenna. Given the programme's strong focus on cofinancing and European-scale infrastructures, strategic prioritisation and coordination at Flemish level remain important.

1.2.3

European Defence Fund (EDF)

The European Defence Fund (EDF) is an EU programme (2021-2027) with a budget of nearly €8 billion that stimulates cooperation in defence research and development. It strengthens the technological sovereignty and competitiveness of the European defence industry.

The EDF is of strategic importance to the Flemish research and innovation landscape in security and defence. The participation of Flemish companies, knowledge institutions and research organisations, as well as the financial contribution Flanders obtains from the EDF, demonstrates a high level of engagement. The EDF is a strategically important vector within the ambitions and objectives of the Flemish Innovation and Industry Strategy for Security and Defence.

1.2.4

European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST)

COST is a European funding mechanism that supports international research networks across all scientific fields. These bottom-up networks are initiated by researchers and remain open to new participants throughout their four-year duration. Funded through the EU's Research and Innovation Framework Programmes since 1971, COST fosters collaboration, knowledge exchange and innovation across Europe and beyond.

1.2.5

European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructure (ESFRI)

The European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) plays a key role in policy-making on research infrastructures in Europe. Flanders participates actively in ESFRI through funding and representation in the relevant working groups. The Einstein

Telescope bid – a Flemish government priority described in section 1.1 of this chapter – is closely linked to ESFRI processes.

1.2.6

Smart Specialisation and Spearhead Clusters in the EU Context

In 2012, following the Communication 'Regional Policy contributing to smart growth in Europe 2020', the EC set up thematic S3 Platforms to assist EU countries and regions to develop, implement and review their Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3). The Flanders' profile for the period 2021-2027 consists of 9 priorities: (1) Sustainable chemistry, (2) Smart manufacturing, (3) Health and life sciences, (4) Specialised logistics, (5) Agro-Food, (6) Electronic systems, IoT and photonic systems, (7) Energy, (8) Environment & cleantech, (9) Blue economy.

The focus of the Flemish cluster policy is on a limited number of large-scale and ambitious spearhead clusters. These clusters develop and implement an ambitious long-term strategy and competitiveness programme for the Flanders strategic domain, in collaboration with companies, knowledge centres and the government (triple helix). Spearhead clusters are also explicitly internationally oriented, focusing on both the internationalisation of the cluster through cooperation with foreign clusters, and the internationalisation of the cluster members.

Current spearhead clusters: Catalisti (sustainable chemistry), ENT.A (entertainment), FLUX50 (energy), VIL (logistics and transport), Flanders' Food (agrofood), Blue Cluster (blue growth), Biova (crossover in biotech, medical and digital technologies).

1.2.7

EU Regional Policy (ERDF / Interreg)

VLAIO is responsible for the implementation of the Flemish programmes related to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) delivered under shared management with the EU Commission. The goal of EU regional ERDF policy is to strengthen the economic and social cohesion by pursuing a better balance between the different EU regions.

The programme 'ERDF Flanders' is investing in two thematic objectives – Smart Flanders and Sustainable Flanders – with specific territorial investment strategies for Limburg, West-Flanders, Kempen and the larger cities Antwerp and Ghent. The programme has an EU-budget of approximately 276 million euro for the whole period. Together with the national contribution, the total financing amounts to approximately 596 million euro.

ERDF Interreg is a collection of multiple programmes that operate within the same EU post-2020 framework aimed at smart, green and inclusive growth. Flanders uses these cross-border programmes to complement and strengthen the ERDF Flanders programme. Three types of Interreg programmes apply:

- › Cross-border programmes: Border regio Flanders-Netherlands, Euregio Meuse-Rhine, France-Wallonie-Flanders.
- › Transnational programmes: North Sea Region and North-West Europe.
- › Interregional programmes: Interreg, URBACT and INTERACT.

1.2.8

Vanguard Initiative

The Vanguard Initiative is an inter-regional network of currently 25 regions from 12 EU Member States. Its main ambition is to contribute to the European agenda and boost industrial transformation by innovation, and to set up networks among regions of different (non-bordering) countries in several domains. The initiative supports the development of innovative industrial value chains in Europe by building on smart specialisation (S3) strategies, based on a four-step methodology: learn, connect, demonstrate, commercialize.

Flanders takes the co-lead, together with Norte (Pt) and South-Netherlands, in the pilot action 'High Performance Production through 3D Printing'. Also in the Smart Health/Personalised Medicine Pilot, Flanders takes the co-lead. Moreover, Flanders is involved in pilot actions on Bio-Economy, ADMA Energy, NANO and ESM.

1.3

Implementing actors for EU Programmes

The implementation of EU-level STI policy in Flanders is carried out by a number of public bodies and agencies. Their roles are complementary and together they ensure that Flemish actors are well-positioned to participate in and benefit from EU programmes.

1.3.1

Research Foundation Flanders (FWO)

FWO's general role and position as an agency within the WEWIS policy domain are presented in Chapter 1.

The Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) actively promotes international collaboration as a lever for research excellence. Their actions relate to international mobility, international collaboration (including joint research projects), international networks, European programmes, and involvement in international policy.

With regard to international and EU programmes specifically, FWO combines a funding role – co-financing Flemish participation in EU-level instruments such as the European Research Council and the Horizon Europe partnerships – with a facilitating role, supporting researcher mobility and a wide network of bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements that allow Flemish researchers to collaborate internationally.

FWO provides back-up funding for excellent ERC applicants (i.e. researchers who applied for funding from the European Research Council but were not selected), ensuring that high-quality proposals that were not funded by the ERC can still be (partially) carried out. In addition, it funds Flemish participation in international collaborations and in selected European partnerships, such as the co-funded partnerships described under Horizon Europe (see section 1.2.1).

International mobility:

- › Incoming – Odysseus programme: a 'brain-gain' programme to (re)-attract top researchers from around the world to the universities of the Flemish Community;
- › Incoming – Grant for a scientific stay in Flanders: researchers can come for 1 up to 3 months to a Flemish research institution;
- › Outgoing – Several grants or fellowships for conferences, workshops, courses, short stays, and longer scientific stays abroad.

International collaboration:

- › Weave: bottom-up cross-European initiative to support excellent European collaborative research projects, based on the Lead Agency Principle. Agreements with Austria (FWF), French-speaking Community of Belgium (F.R.S.-FNRS), Germany (DFG), Luxembourg (FNR), Poland (NCN), Slovenia (ARIS), Sweden (Formas) and/or Switzerland (SNSF);
- › Scientific mobility projects to promote exchange of researchers: agreements with Japan, China, Brazil, France (Tournesol), South Korea and Taiwan;
- › Bilateral research cooperation: with Brazil, China, Vietnam, South Africa and Québec (Canada);
- › International research infrastructure: support for researchers at Flemish Community institutes who want to conduct research at major international research facilities;
- › International Coordination Action: support for coordination activities of international collaborative associations (EU, OECD, UN, UNESCO, WHO...);
- › Organisation of scientific meetings in Belgium: support for researchers for the organisation of scientific conferences;
- › Scientific Research Network: support for coordination of scientific research networks at postdoctoral level.

FWO also facilitates the operations of Einstein Telescope Flanders, which is embedded within the FWO. In doing so, Flanders is strengthening a compelling bid to bring the Einstein Telescope to the border region of Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. ET-Flanders also actively invests in science communication for the Einstein Telescope.

1.3.2

Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship (VLAIO)

VLAIO is the National Contact Point (NCP) for Flanders for supporting applications relating to thematic programmes within the Framework Programme for Research & Innovation, the Partnerships, EUREKA and some Joint Undertakings.

In the field of international innovation, VLAIO provides co-funding for participants from Flanders to take part in European projects, including projects under the Partnerships, the Chips Joint Undertaking, and EUREKA. EUREKA is an intergovernmental initiative to promote international cooperation through projects for applied and market-oriented industrial R&D, based on a bottom-up principle. Belgium, through a collaboration between VLAIO, SPW, Innoviris and Belspo, holds the EUREKA presidency for the 2026–2027 period.

VLAIO further participates in several Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEIs) in domains such as batteries, hydrogen, microelectronics, cloud technologies and health, and is currently involved in ongoing IPCEIs in areas including artificial intelligence, advanced semiconductor technologies, innovative nuclear technologies, circular advanced materials and bioeconomy.

Moreover, VLAIO shares best practices with other European agencies in the innovation domain and is involved in various international networks and actions. For example, it is a member of the Association for Technology Implementation in Europe (TAFTIE). In 2026, VLAIO acts as chair of TAFTIE.

The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) Flanders consists of VLAIO and FIT (Flanders Investment and Trade), and provides companies with reliable information on European legislation and regulations, connects them with European and international partners for economic and technological cooperation, and offers access to a global network.

1.3.3

NCP Flanders

FWO and VLAIO together serve as National Contact Points (NCPs) for the EU research and innovation programs Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe. Since summer 2021, NCP Flanders has also been the contact point for the Digital Europe Programme (DEP) and EDF. NCP Flanders provides free of charge information and advice to all stakeholders located in Flanders (enterprises, institutes, non-profit organisations, universities, university colleges...) and to all Flemish public institutions located anywhere in Belgium.

1.3.4

VLEVA

The Flemish-European Liaison Agency (VLEVA) is a not-for-profit association subsidized on a structural basis by the Flemish Government. VLEVA's mission is to form a link between the EU and the civil society and local authorities in Flanders. In the field of STI, VLEVA monitors the calls from various EU initiatives, in order to provide maximal information on opportunities for EU programme participation for actors from Flanders. It also takes part in the European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN) for Flanders.



All the different public and private actors that are interested or eligible can initiate their own policy initiatives and programmes at the international level.

2

Bilateral and international activities (excluding EU-related activities)

2.1

Policy preparation and follow-up

2.1.1

Department of Chancellery & Foreign Affairs

Flanders acts internationally in all areas for which it has internal jurisdiction such as economy, innovation, education and employment. Flanders has the constitutional right to conclude internationally-binding treaties in these areas, and can appoint diplomatic representatives abroad. The Department of Foreign Affairs monitors international policy coherence and is responsible for the coordination between the various policy areas. It is also the first point of contact for foreign embassies and diplomatic representations.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is the responsible administration for bilateral and multilateral treaties, agreements and declarations of intent. These agreements are often elaborated through multi-annual working programmes that cover various policy areas, one of which is scientific research and innovation. The current active agreements include those with Estonia, Latvia, Poland, South Africa, Romania, Lithuania, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Bulgaria, North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany), Catalonia (Spain) and the German-speaking Community (Belgium). Several other agreements are currently being negotiated.

The Minister-President of Flanders offers Flemish STI actors the possibility to participate in official missions abroad, based on the so-called 'academic diplomacy' principle. Flemish STI actors (universities, innovative companies, knowledge institutes) can also participate in Belgian economic missions or other official missions (e.g. State visits) that take place all over the world.

2.1.2

The WEWIS Department

The WEWIS Department prepares and monitors the memoranda of understanding (MoU) that are concluded directly between the administrations or ministers charged with R&D&I. During ministerial missions abroad or during the official visits of foreign delegations to the Flemish minister or to public WEWIS entities, such agreements may be discussed and/or signed officially.

In some cases, treaties that include topics relating to scientific research exist or are being prepared between Belgium and another country. Whenever it is required, the WEWIS Department acts as the responsible entity to monitor such agreements.

2.1.3

International organisations

In addition to the EU level, Flanders also has representative functions linked to the preparation and follow-up of the policy-making of various international organisations. This includes the OECD and the United Nations (UN). More precisely:

OECD:

- › The Committee for Scientific and Technological Policy (CSTP): The WEWIS Department participates in the CSTP as well as in several of its sub groups, including the Global Science Forum, the Working Party on Technology and Innovation Policy (TIP), the National Experts on Science and Technology Indicators (NESTI), and the Working Party on Biotechnology, Nanotechnology and Converging Technologies (BNCT). WEWIS also provides a substantial contribution to the OECD's STIP Compass.
- › The Digital Policy Committee (DPC): WEWIS is involved in this committee as well.
- › The OECD Steel Committee and the Global Forum on Steel Excess Capacity (GFSEC).

UN:

- › Support for the Flanders UNESCO Science Trust Fund (FUST: capacity building in developing countries);
- › United Nations University – Centre for Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) until 2025;
- › The project office of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) for IODE at Ostend.

NATO:

- › The Flemish Government decided in 2023 to contribute to two NATO initiatives: the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) and the NATO Innovation Fund. DIANA focuses on dual-use technologies for solving security and defence issues, including AI, big data and cloud computing, hypersonic systems, quantum and biotechnology.
- › The NATO Innovation Fund is the world's first multi-sovereign venture capital fund. The fund will invest €1 billion in early-stage start-ups and other venture capital funds working on emerging and disruptive dual-use technologies. Three Flemish Strategic Research Centers (SRC) will act as a test center within the NATO Alliance.



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2.2**Policy implementation****2.2.1****Flanders Investment and Trade (FIT)**

Flanders Investment & Trade (FIT) plays a central role in the internationalisation of the Flemish economy. It supports Flanders-based companies in their export and internationalisation ambitions, while also attracting and guiding foreign investors to Flanders. FIT provides tailored advice, market intelligence, networking opportunities and financial support, and works with partners to strengthen Flanders' international business strategy. Together with VLAIO, FIT organises Enterprise Europe Network Flanders, which helps companies access European and international opportunities, partners, technologies and funding.

A key priority within FIT's internationalisation strategy is the global positioning of Flanders as a leading innovative and technology-driven region. FIT has a strong worldwide network of more than 70 offices, including 10 Science & Technology Counselors in key innovation hotspots: New York, Palo Alto, Paris, London, Copenhagen, Munich, Mumbai, Singapore, Guangzhou and Tokyo. These offices focus on Digital Tech, Health Tech and Climate Tech. They connect Flanders-based companies, research centres, clusters and other innovation actors with international technology ecosystems, while also identifying foreign technology players that can strengthen Flanders' innovation landscape.

While FIT focuses primarily on the internationalisation of companies and the positioning of Flanders within global technology ecosystems, the WEWIS Department contributes to the bilateral and multilateral implementation of STI policy from a governmental perspective. Its role is situated at the interface between policy, diplomacy and international cooperation, translating Flemish STI priorities into concrete agreements, programmes and exchanges with partner countries and international organisations

Figure 10



Source: © Flanders Investment and Trade (FIT) Agency

Table 4

Hotspot	Focus Area	Focus Domain
New York	East Coast US	Health Tech
Palo Alto	Bay Area – West Coast US	Digital Tech & Climate Tech
Paris	France & South Europe	Digital Tech & Health Tech
London	UK	Health Tech & Digital Tech
Copenhagen	Scandinavia	Health Tech & Climate Tech
Munich	DACH region (Germany, Austria, Switzerland)	Digital Tech & Health Tech
Mumbai	India	Digital Tech
Singapore	South & Southeast Asia	Digital Tech & Climate Tech
Guangzhou	Pearl River Delta – China	Digital Tech
Tokyo	Japan	Health Tech & Digital Tech

2.2.2

WEWIS Department – Bilateral Implementation

The WEWIS Department manages several multi-annual agreements and their accompanying budgets to implement actions within the framework of the United Nations (UN), including the Flanders UNESCO Science Trust Fund (FUST).

The WEWIS Department also hosts, or is part of the Flemish delegation, during visits from foreign authorities, delegations and multilateral authorities. Conversely, it can be a part of, or represented in, Flanders' delegations abroad.

Through the 'Flanders Inspires International Visitors Programme' (FIIVP), the WEWIS Department presents Flanders' strengths in the fields of economy, science and innovation, and learns from other countries and regions. The FIIVP has been ongoing since 2010 and aims to establish long-term relationships with high-level international opinion-makers and decision-makers by organising a broad multi-sectoral programme, usually focused on a specific theme.

2.2.3

FWO – Bilateral Research Collaboration

The FWO supports bilateral research cooperation through specific agreements and funding instruments. Scientific cooperation and researcher exchange agreements exist with Japan, China, Brazil, Argentina, France, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, Mexico and France-Tournesol. Bilateral research cooperation programmes exist with Brazil, China, Vietnam, South Africa and Québec (Canada).

2.2.4

VLAIO – Cross-border Programmes

In the field of international cooperation via the EU Regional Development Fund (Interreg), there are several ERDF-Interreg initiatives in which STI actors, public authorities and private partners from Flanders jointly support multi-annual projects. Projects support new strategic initiatives such as the Einstein Telescope bid in the region Meuse-Rhine. Cooperation between SMEs takes place within 3 CrossRoads programmes and in Crosscare 2.0. Furthermore, there are cooperations with the neighbouring regions of North Brabant (the Netherlands) and North Rhine Westphalia (Germany) based on joint government declarations. In recent years, collaboration has been extended to the domains of sustainable chemistry and circular economy.



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VLAIO also supports Flemish participation in EUREKA, an intergovernmental initiative that promotes international cooperation through market-oriented industrial R&D projects. EUREKA enables companies and knowledge actors to build bottom-up international consortia, with support provided through national and regional funding schemes.

3

International activities from research organisations

Most research and innovation-performing organisations can autonomously develop international links, ranging from network memberships and joint initiatives to bilateral agreements and foreign representation. Such initiatives are the result of a gradual trend towards greater internationalisation, whereby companies, universities, research institutes and knowledge centres develop bottom-up cooperation with foreign partners.

All five **universities of the Flemish Community** have developed partnership and cooperation agreements with research organisations worldwide and take part in international networks and programmes. Examples include the Coimbra Group (KU Leuven), CESAER (UGent), the University Consortium International (UHasselt), the Network of Universities from Capitals of Europe (VUB) and the Utrecht Network (UA). All five universities are a member of the European University Association (EUA). On top of that, they are all part of several other international initiatives aiming to shape EU policy, such as the League of European Research Universities – LERU (KU Leuven), The Guild (UGent) and the Young European Research Universities Network – YERUN (UA).

The Flemish strategic research centres are strongly embedded in international research and innovation networks, each in line with their specific mission and domain. **Imec** has developed a pronounced global presence, with its headquarters in Leuven and an extensive network of research sites and offices across

Europe, the United States and Asia. **VITO** combines a strong European orientation with an active international footprint beyond Europe, with subsidiaries and long-term activities in India and the Middle East. The international engagement of **VIB** is primarily situated within the European research landscape, contributing to knowledge exchange and the strengthening of European research excellence in the life sciences. Most strategic research centres are members of EARTO, the European association representing research and technology organisations and supporting their role in Europe's innovation ecosystem. **Flanders Make** participates in numerous international collaborative projects and is actively engaged in initiatives such as the Mechatronic Alliance, and the Eureka Smart Platform. VLIZ concludes cooperation agreements with international universities, research institutions and individual research groups, and participates in international networks and projects in the field of marine sciences. ITG works with many scientific institutions, governments and organisations all over the world for the long-lasting improvement of health care and disease control in developing countries.

In addition to the above examples of universities and (strategic) research centres, all other knowledge centres and organisations in Flanders cooperate with international partners in various initiatives, networks or actions.

