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453



Top academics sound the alarm over funding cuts
Flanders could lose hundreds of scientists

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Flanders could lose as many as 740 scientific researchers to unemployment or to other countries if the federal government carries out a threat to cut research budgets, the region's top academics have warned. In an outspoken opinion article published last week in *De Standaard*, the rectors of Flanders' five universities – Antwerp, Ghent, the Free University of Brussels (VUB), Leuven and Hasselt – criticised a "lack of vision and courage" and pointed out how governments in France and the United States were choosing precisely this time of crisis to increase investment in research.

"Despite the constant lip-service paid to the

importance of research and innovation, it is our conclusion that science risks being gradually crippled as a result of shrinking budgets," the article says. "We, the five rectors of the Flemish universities, find ourselves forced into sounding the alarm."

Funding of basic research in Flanders is carried out by the Scientific Research Fund (FWO), which is financed to the tune of 20% by the federal government. The Flemish government, for its part, has already cut this year's financing by €3 million, with further cuts of €4.2 million looming for next year. In their article, the rectors

refer to rumours that the federal government, faced with a €20 billion budget hole, might withdraw their funding for the FWO altogether. That, the rectors say, would represent a loss of some €37 million, which would lead to more than 700 researchers having to stop their work. "Cutting into budgets is a logical reaction in times of crisis," the article says. "But line by line cuts are an option that displays a lack of vision and courage. If there is one sector where more investment is now needed, that is research and innovation."

→ continued on page 3



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Universities warn of Flemish brain-drain if cuts go ahead

The rectors don't need to travel far for counter examples. In Germany, for instance, the federal government has approved a multi-year plan representing €20 billion in new scientific investment. "France and the United States have also made additional efforts to push up investment," they point out, citing "more than one international study" demonstrating how those countries who make the most research in-

vestment stand in the strongest position for economic growth.

In 2010, the number of applications for research grants from the FWO rose by 20%, but at the same time the chances that an application would be successful fell to 22% – meaning that nearly four in five applications are rejected. In neighbouring countries, the success rate is often over 30%. The result is that Flemish research talent is driven out of the country; while Flemish universities are less attractive



to research talent from abroad. Flanders has a respectable and growing reputation to defend, the rectors point out. The number of papers being published by labs in Flemish universities – considered the most important benchmark of academic success – has doubled since the 1990s. Flanders is now in fourth position in Europe, behind the Scandinavian countries and ahead of the Netherlands.

Quality, too, as measured by the number of times Flemish papers are cited by peer researchers, is also on the rise, with Flanders sitting in third place behind the Netherlands and Germany. Patent applications from Flanders have grown from 5% of all EU patents in 1995 to 17% now, with 70% of all patents reaching the marketplace, either via university spin-offs or independent companies.

The article concludes by calling on the federal government negotiators to make a commitment not to abandon the FWO. At the same time, the Flemish government should pump more funds into fundamental research.

- Meanwhile, Ghent University has posted vacancies for 25 top researchers to lead five specialist research groups. As *Flanders Today* reported back in April, the university is to set up specialist groups to carry



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Professor Paul De Knop is rector of the VUB and chairman of the FWO

out research in biotechnology for a sustainable economy, infections and immunity, neuroscience, bio-informatics and nano- and biophotonics. The posts were advertised on the Nature Jobs website last week.

No details of salaries were available, but the university's deputy rector in charge of research, Luc Moens, said, "The world's best don't come for the money; they're attracted by the scientific challenge, the area the research group is covering, the people they'll be working with, the expertise that's around them and the infrastructure that's provided. And especially for the ambition the group itself shows."

"They'll be paid according to the existing rates," he added. "It may be that some extras are agreed during discussions, but it's not our intention from the outset to pay them more," he said. According to the announcement, each of the five groups will be funded from university reserves to the tune of €2.5 million. The new researchers will be paid from the university's Special Research Fund (BOF), which is financed by the Flemish government. ♦

Details of the jobs concerned are published in English at

→ www.ugent.be/en/research