



Special Dossier

Bringing talent together

With the prospect of the inauguration of the renovated Leuven campus looming, this special dossier focuses on the School as a catalyst for an innovative, creative and internationally oriented economy. The campus in Leuven is not only strategically important to the School itself; it also fills a gap in the Leuven knowledge region in the field of management training and coaching. Acting as a bridge between academic research and its implementation in practice is a role that the School fulfils not just in its capacity as the business school of Ghent University and K.U.Leuven, however. As the knowledge centre of Flanders DC – a platform set up by the Flemish government in 2004 to provide support and heighten companies' awareness of innovative and creative entrepreneurship – it ensures that academic research is channelled through to the business community and that it is translated into practical tools and training programmes.

Leuven campus committed to the future

With K.U.Leuven and Ghent University as its two parent universities, it follows that Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School has two campuses, one in Ghent and the other in Leuven. Following the relocation of the Ghent campus in 2003, attention shifted to Leuven. The main items on the agenda were creating more space for researchers, lecturers and classrooms, and extending facilities to meet the needs of an international student body and executive course participants. The expansion and renovation of the campus is much more than just a logistic exercise, however.

Based on interviews with Prof. Roland Van Dierdonck, Dean of Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, Mr Patrick De Greve, General Director of Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, Prof. Leo Sleuwaegen, Leuven Campus Associate Dean, and Prof. Jef Roos, Honorary Chairman of the Voka network of businesses and Chairman of the Board of Directors of K.U.Leuven.

'Twas the night before Christmas...

It is a fairly well-known fact that Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School has its roots in Ghent. In 1999, however, when the School signed a management agreement with K.U.Leuven and Ghent University, it was established that there would also be a campus in Leuven. This campus would, first and foremost, offer K.U.Leuven's international MBA programme, which would henceforth be part of the School's curriculum. The search for a suitable site ended on Christmas Eve – a nice symbolic touch. The former engineering school in Vlamingenstraat – the *école polytechnique* – was transformed in no time into the School's Leuven campus with the help of the university. Although the infrastructure met the minimum requirements, not all the facilities that students doing an international MBA programme expect to see were available. The shortage of space for researchers and lecturers was another obstacle. Some were given offices in the nearby economics faculty, but the distance, short as it was, was not conducive to interaction with the students. Moreover, the range of courses available for executives, usually organised off campus, was deliberately not expanded due to lack of space. In 1999 it was not yet apparent how the

campus in Leuven should evolve, so the School held off on its expansion plans for a while. The thriving success of the international full-time MBA programme, which was attracting more and more students every year from a growing number of different countries, meant that the need for a larger and better campus eventually became acute.

One school, two campuses

Besides creating more space and accommodation, the renovated campus also

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serves strategic interests. "It was established in the management agreement right from the word go that the School would develop two equivalent campuses," explains Vlerick Dean Roland Van Dierdonck. "The expansion and renovation of our campus in Leuven therefore

sends an important signal to K.U.Leuven confirming our commitment, because as long as you simply lease a building from someone, your relationship tends to lack that commitment. The new campus will firmly establish a physical link between the university and the School. From a psychological point of view it's important for both universities to realise that they have their own management school on hand and can make use of it when need be. Our experience with the new campus in Ghent also taught us that it's vital to really feel part of a campus. Students and executive participants form a symbiotic community and want to meet one another on campus. When executives see students, it indicates to them that the School is an academic working establishment and is not just following fashion trends. Conversely, students get the message that the theory they're learning is relevant in the real business world. The presence of researchers and professors also fosters interaction and has an intellectually stimulating effect. However, the building in Leuven was too small to really create that campus atmosphere." Nevertheless, the School deliberately opted to keep the campus in the centre of Leuven, between the faculty buildings of K.U.Leuven. "Initially, with the full-time MBA programme in Leuven, we had a

mono-product campus and we were determined to change that,” explains General Director Patrick De Greve. “The deliberate choice of a central location was mainly prompted by the infrastructure and facilities that a university town like Leuven has to offer. The proximity of various faculties of K.U.Leuven will also intensify collaboration with the university’s lecturers and professors, in terms of both teaching and research. Access to that exceptional pool of talent gives the campus an extra boost of oxygen.”

Natural 'biotope'

With its international MBA programme and prime location near Brussels, initially the idea was that the campus in Leuven would become the international arm of the School. Not only the School’s programmes but also its research would be planned with this in mind. This strategy is now somewhat superseded, as Ghent already has numerous international pro-

grammes. Although they are equivalent, the campuses in Ghent and Leuven are far from being identical twins. Splitting the School’s five competence centres is difficult in practical terms and would not yield any additional benefit. In practice, the research centres within the competence centres are based either in Ghent or Leuven, depending on their field of research. “The decision as to where you house a particular research centre is something that develops naturally – you have to have a critical mass and a strategic context,” explains Professor Sleuwaegen, Leuven Campus Associate Dean. “Flanders DC is a good example of that. With the number of researchers that we’ve gathered together around the knowledge centre of Flanders DC in Leuven, we have the critical mass to enable this research unit to operate in its own right. Another factor that determines whether a research unit is based in Ghent or Leuven is the natural breeding

ground the location offers. The proximity of the European institutions in Brussels makes it a logical choice for Leuven campus to focus more on the subject of ‘Doing Business in Europe’, which includes, for example, projects exploring the competitiveness of various regions within Europe or the allure of particular regions and countries for foreign investors. Projects are also being set up on legal aspects and topics such as CSR in Europe. This kind of research invariably involves benchmarking, which entails systematically documenting good practices of other regions in Europe. Looking to the future, the plan is to publicise the results via seminars.”

“As regards the issue of ‘Technological Venturing’, Leuven again has the advantage of being situated within a natural ‘biotope’ of innovative knowledge companies,” adds Van Dierdonck. “Naturally, what we have here is a win-win situation in which research and practical know-how are shared.” And the symbiosis gives students a taste of what is in store for them. De Greve again: “For MBA students interested in technological venturing it’s great for them to be able to see for themselves at the end of their course, during their work placement, how an entrepreneur prepares his business plan to move on to the next round of investment financing. We give students the chance to get their hands dirty and find out what real business is like, but as a management school that means you have to be close to the action.”

Breeding ground for talent

Talent is much sought after because it is a scarce commodity. Not so much in terms of numbers – the fact is that globalisation has quickened the pace of the brain drain and more and more companies around the globe are now crying out for talented people with the right profiles. In this respect the new campus of Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School is a blessing for the knowledge companies in and around Leuven. The School has expanded its already extensive international network of former students with 750 MBA alumni of K.U.Leuven. Over the past 12 months seven international chapters have been established by alumni, specifically in The Hague, Paris,

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London, Frankfurt, New York, Beijing and St Petersburg. De Greve: "I think that, as a reputable international management school, we're doing the business community in this country a favour. Talent that they usually have to spend a fortune head-hunting and recruiting, we bring straight to their door. We've expanded our Career Services and made it more professional, thus optimising the recruitment of our students by companies. Some Belgian firms with registered offices abroad, in China for instance, have every reason to take on a Chinese student who is doing an MBA with us, train him in the parent company and then have him run the business in China. Often things happen the other way round: they bring someone with no background knowledge of Europe over here to do a course."

Management school fills gap in knowledge region

It is anticipated that, compared to Ghent, the renovated Leuven campus will attract potential participants to our non-residential executive programmes from a different catchment area, specifically from the provinces of Flemish Brabant, Limburg and Antwerp. The many international companies on the outskirts of Brussels are also a target group. Leuven itself is well-known as a very dynamic knowledge region and, according to Sleuwaegen, this brings the School face-to-face with some exciting challenges: "Discussions are currently in progress between Leuven, Aachen and Eindhoven, which want to work more closely together as a technology triangle. With the infrastructure and accommodation that the campus in Leuven will give us, we can become an important partner on the academic and business front." Henceforth the numerous spin-off companies of K.U.Leuven will also be able to make use of the management school more easily. "Technological venturing, innovation and entrepreneurship are extremely relevant issues for spin-offs," according to De Greve. "It's just that they can barely find time to come to us. So as well as offering courses, we're developing alternative options such as contract research or coaching to support them. There's currently a lack of management training



Prof. Jef Roos, Prof. Roland Van Dierdonck, Prof. Leo Sleuwaegen and Mr Patrick De Greve.

and coaching available in the region, so that's one area where we can play an important role." Professor Jef Roos, Honorary Chairman of the Voka network of businesses and Chairman of the Board of Directors of K.U.Leuven, fully concurs with this view: "We need the input of an academic management school that will transform the region into a sort of Flemish Silicon Valley, where a cluster of

panies to share experiences within the context of a network, but no provision has yet been made for formal training or coaching. A management school, firmly established in the Leuven region, therefore has an important task to perform in bridging the gap between university and business community." ■

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companies involved in micro-electronics, biomedical technology and materials technology can develop and grow. Without institutions like Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, this kind of initiative would have to be undertaken anyway, but the process would just not be so professional or swift. Leuven Inc. may be an initiative that allows compa-

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