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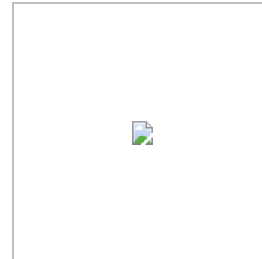
Horizon 2020: Special Coverage

PUBLISHED: 19 JUNE 2013



It's time to change the academic mindset and engage with industry

Joanne O'Dea, Science|Business



Slawomir Majewski, Deputy Rector for Science and International Relations, Medical University of Warsaw

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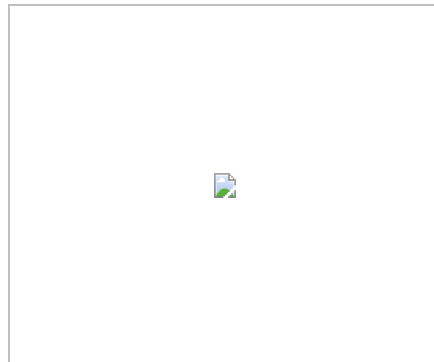
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It has roots going back to the 18th century and international recognition for aspects of its research, but it is only in recent years that the Medical University of Warsaw (MUW) has begun to create a framework for translating this research into the clinic and through to the development of new drugs. Now under a major EU co-funded project, BASTION – from Basic to Translational Research in Oncology, MUW is investing €5.3 million to build up its translational medicine capabilities.

BASTION is forging collaborations with other European research institutes and looking to work with industry partners. Slawomir Majewski, Deputy Rector for Science and International Relations hopes these relationships will lead to a change in mindset at MUW.

Building on investment

In interview with Science|Business, Majewski describes how MUW is poised to build on some significant investment in the university's infrastructure. "We've had a lot of investment," he said. One project - the Centre for Preclinical Studies and Technology – has a budget of almost €100 million to construct new laboratories and facilities, and purchase equipment. "Now we have to put new blood into this system, we need young scientists and postdoc students to make progress in the development of research at the university."

This is where BASTION, with its aim of turning MUW into a leading research and clinical oncology centre in central Europe, fits into the strategy.

New Perspectives

"BASTION is important because it is based on close collaboration with leading European scientific institutions," said Majewski. Research teams in Warsaw are cooperating with eleven partner organisations and two innovation-driven SMEs, via secondments. According to Majewski, the key to these collaborations is "knowledge exchange, not only medical information but also experience in technology transfer."

Postdoc students and young scientists are taking part in exchanges with partner institutions, including the University of Leuven and the Institute of Virology at the University of Cologne, and MUW. When asked what the researchers gained from this, Majewski answers instantaneously "experience". "New methods, new technologies, but also experience in technology transfer. I believe they are also changing their mentality and I hope they will implement this new way of thinking at our university."

The expectation is that the collaborations outlive the BASTION project. "This is the aim of exchanging young scientists, with the hope they will maintain these relationships," Majewski said.

Learning to move from lab to clinic

The university is now focused on developing a tech transfer system and BASTION has provided "excellent examples in Europe...on how to go from the lab to the clinic," said Majewski. Education is the key. "This is the main problem now. We have to start with education – we have to educate our researchers and our colleagues on the procedures for commercialising their projects." MUW recently established an Academic Centre for Innovation, which will run educational programmes including courses on the importance of intellectual property rights and the commercialisation of R&D. "It is an education in both business and science," Majewski said.

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However, Majewski believes a change in researchers' perspectives will not be enough. A more profound, institutional change is needed. "A big problem in Poland is that until now all scientific institutes and universities preferred to build their own centres for technology transfer. On the campus now, we have ten or more technology transfer centres, which makes no sense. There should only be one, but it should be very good and professional," he said.

MUW shares a large campus with institutions belonging to the Polish Academy of Sciences and the University of Warsaw. "The potential here is huge, and so we decided to create a cluster, BioTechMed Cluster Mazovia (BTM). The cluster has begun work on establishing a modern centre for technology transfer and has received venture capital for two very promising projects with real potential for commercialisation in oncology."

Liaising with industry

For the cluster to be successful, however, it needs industrial expertise in the form of "biotech brokers". The push to connect with industry must be "proactive not passive", says Majewski. "Industry is waiting for academia and academia is waiting for industry. They don't know how to meet each other. They need an interface and the technology transfer centre [provides this]."

With both an Academic Centre for Clinical Research and a Centre for Preclinical Studies on campus, as well as main academic hospitals, Majewski believes the cluster can attract not only SMEs but also large pharmaceutical companies.

This requires "a special kind of proactivity", he said. "There is still a huge gap between the pharmaceutical industry and academia. The centre must be active with personal contacts, attracting big pharma to the campus, showing them our capacity and capability. It should offer not only new technologies and new molecules, but also a service within the whole process of drug development."

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