Interview: Thijs De Kleer – Managing Director & Saco de Visser – Director of Cluster Development, Leiden Bio Science Park, The Netherlands

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Thijs De Kleer, Managing Director, Saco de Visser, Director Cluster Development, discuss recent developments at the Netherlands largest science park and how Leiden has positioned itself as a leader in early stages of development, which creates a great environment to foster innovation.

Thijs De Kleer

Leiden lies at the center of the Dutch biotech industry, with the Leiden Bio Science Park positioned at the center of the region's life science cluster. How would you describe the Leiden Bio Science Park's role within the Dutch life science ecosystem?

Leiden Bio Science Park is a cluster comprised of over 85 life science companies, including the largest number of life science start-ups in the country the BioPartner center, the Leiden University

Medical Center, and six world class academic/education centers, with a clear focus on biomedical and biomolecular sciences. We thus rank as the leading life sciences cluster in the Netherlands and ranks among the top five most successful science parks in Europe.

We welcome all life science companies and institutions to our park, and we preserve a clear target cluster focus – therapeutic interventions – to better differentiate Leiden from other bioscience regions in the world. Our main job is thus to manage interplay within the cluster to maximize connectivity between actors and to work with new innovative companies to help them recognize and achieve their future route. To further this mission, we also mobilize the local “founding fathers of innovation” and CEOs of local biotech success stories as part of our advisory board. Overall, creating and stimulating a cluster and ecosystem where innovative ideas are easily transferred and developed from lab to patient is our goal.

What key success stories for the Dutch innovation scene emerged at Leiden Bio Science Park?

Examples of recent successes in Leiden Bio Science Park illustrating the strong therapy development potential locally include Prosensa, a developer of RNA-modulating therapeutics for rare diseases such as driapersen for Duchenne muscular dystrophy and that was acquired by Biomarin for upwards of USD 800 million in 2014, Pharming Group and its product Ruconest, which stands as the first biotech product fully developed in the Netherlands, and Janssens’ Ebola vaccine and infliximab (Remicade), an antibody administered intravenously used to treat autoimmune diseases.

What makes Leiden Bio Science Park such an innovative place?

The atmosphere at Leiden Bio Science Park and the Dutch culture combine to create optimal conditions for business creation and maintenance locally. The Dutch have a very strong track record of educating both the public and private side of the industry, while the Dutch mentality also means that we focus more on being the best overall as a cluster rather than on the success of any one company. Collaboration and cooperation are key. Furthermore, it is very normal in our culture to have a very informal conversation with leading executives; the Dutch maintain an open door policy that enables the creation of businesses and partnerships in the region. Adam Cohen from the Centre for Human Drug Research is a good example. Not only is he a medical doctor that sees patients at the Leiden University Medical Center (LUMC), he is also the CEO of a clinical research organization and a professor in pharmacology. This is typically for the low threshold interplay we see at the Leiden Bio Science Park and what drives innovation. Innovation is not always at the desk

of a hospital, but instead innovation is found in people and roles that pursue the multidimensional lifestyles that produce creativity.

What partnerships and initiatives are fueling current growth at the Leiden Bio Science Park?

We are currently finishing the Biotech Training Facility, a state-of-the-art GMP trainings facility, as well as Leiden Future lab, an MBA- like post master education for life science entrepreneurs initiated at the LUMC. The Center for Human Drug Research stands as a solid example of adding great value to clinical therapy development. by their unique approach. The LUMC, Leiden University both provide top level education and many additional efforts are currently invested in stimulating entrepreneurship at various educational stages. The Park continually fosters different partnerships for educational purposes for both the public and private sector. Finally, the companies in the Park continue to prove to be the innovative engine of Leiden Bio Science Park by creating and developing innovative products and services over the last 30 years.

In many cases where private companies provide services to innovators, we see more of a one way flow of investment. Does the Leiden Bio Science Park play a key role in helping to manage and balance the marketplace for services in this region?

We tend not to interfere in the way the individual companies operate. Our concerns lie with the progress of the cluster as a whole. We serve as the glue between the academia, companies, and institutions in this region. We are very fortunate to have to have a substantial number of top level companies and institutions providing a world class ecosystem to develop future medicines. The nature of the game is the continuous interplay between all stakeholders and that is exactly what has been in place in Leiden for years. This makes Leiden a one-stop-shop cluster to develop the health care interventions of the future. Leiden Bio Science Park tries to maximize collisions.

The Netherlands has what some may call a hostile environment for the pharmaceutical industry due to strong pressures to bring down prices. Many of the companies that potentially want to be part of the Leiden Bio Science Park may be constrained by these price concerns and budgetary issues. How do you manage the Park considering the pressure that many of these types of companies face?

Partnerships will continue to happen as long as the advanced ideas are innovative. We have astrong focus on the early stages of development, which creates a great environment to foster innovation. It is the impact products may have on the lives of people is what drives the people and continues to deliver products to the market. With this focus on innovation, Leiden Bio Science Park

has also successfully attracted investments from leading international companies. Janssen is heavily implanted locally, while Japanese Astellas undertook a major investment and located their European R&D HQ in the Park in the past years.

The park has 30 years of history and success, what sets you apart compared to other parks around the world?

Many areas around the world produce innovation. Leiden is but a small area in the world, but we have accomplished a great deal of amazing feats. Our continued focus on developing tomorrow's medicines will set us apart from other bioscience clusters around the world. The density of people involved in (often early stage) therapeutic development is very high in this cluster, while the partnerships between companies, associations, and universities in our cluster further enhance our innovative capacity. The easy interplay between all relevant actors has proven its success in the past and is setting the standard for modern biotech.

You mentioned before that you define success at the park by innovation. How will define success in terms of innovation in the next five years? What would you like to accomplish?

We would like to be the European leaders in developing future medicines. Interventions to cure or prevent illness will continue to evolve and we are amongst the frontrunners of these developments. Other significant contributions of biotechnology to society will continue to deliver great products and services. Our R&D plaza and mobilization of the next wave of innovative companies for the region will be key in reaching this goal. By 2020, we would thus hope to see twenty new biotech start-ups emerging at Leiden Bio Science Park.

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