Françoise Smets – Dean, Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry, UCLouvain, Belgium

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Françoise Smets, dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at Université Catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain), introduces the innovation and research capacity of the institution as the top-ranking French-speaking university in Belgium. Smets goes on to give her assessment of the Belgian academic landscape and shares the importance of the government continuing to prioritise the education of the country's next generation of healthcare professionals.

Can you please begin by introducing yourself and UCLouvain, the top-ranked French-speaking university in Belgium – in addition to the Faculty of Medicine?

As of September 2019, I became the dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry at UCLouvain. I am a paediatrician, and more specifically a gastro-paediatrician. I have worked at Clinique Saint Luc and UCLouvain in the last decade as a clinical professor prior to my role as Dean. Over the years, I became actively involved and participated in the life of the University, for example, I have been the president of the Jury of master and vice-dean for clinical rotation for clinical students.

UCLouvain is the biggest French-speaking university of Belgium and has a long history, celebrating its 600th anniversary in 2025. The university is composed of three main departments: the health sector, sciences and technology sector, and human sciences sector. The Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry is part of the university’s health sector which also includes three other faculties and five

research institutes.

UCLouvain has a dominant position for medical studies in Belgium as the faculty offers from degrees from bachelor level to PhD. Unlike some other schools, we are able to cover the whole education of doctors. As a matter of fact, around 50 percent of French-speaking Belgian doctors are graduating from UCLouvain. Thanks to our excellent reputation, we are able to attract international students as well.

How do you view access to healthcare?

Talking about access to healthcare in Belgium, I believe it is very well developed and accessible. Overall, Belgian has a healthcare system that enables patients to have simple and excellent navigation of the system; allowing visits to any general or specialist doctor when needed.

For the time being, there are no shortages of general practitioners, except in some specific areas, but it might become a problem in the years to come. In the past, students tended to choose specialized courses and the general practitioner course was not as recognized as it should have been. For UCLouvain this is a priority that we want to promote. A general practitioner is amongst the toughest profession for doctors while not being glorified as so. Therefore, we are trying to raise interest in becoming general practitioners instead of just specialists and motivate students and young doctors to consider this path.

How significant are research activities with regards to the faculty of medicine?

A few years ago, the decision of UCLouvain was to distinguish teaching and research within the university. In other words, faculties are meant for education and clearly separated from the research institutes meant for research. Nevertheless, we closely collaborate within the university to ensure that teaching and research continue to go hand to hand; indeed, every academic doctor is affiliated to both a faculty and a research centre. From the faculty perspective, we work closely and cooperate with the research institutes in order for our students to have the best learning possible.

In which fields of study does the faculty have particular expertise?

As I said, UCLouvain has a long history, and over the years, we have developed several ranges of specialties and expertise in research such as cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, rheumatology, and neurosciences with an institute specifically dedicated to this field of research.

Thanks to the clinical research institute, we have been pioneers in some emerging sciences such as cell research. We have experience in stem cell research and innovative therapies amongst others, with access to a cell banking and cell facilities that enables UCLouvain to further research on this field.

In addition, with the De Duve Institute, we are paving the way for cancer treatment with vaccines. In other words, we work on everything related to cancer treatment, a lot of advancements and research are happening to improve cancer treatment and a very specific one for UC Louvain is related to tumoral antigens and vaccination.

Of course, we also have an important pharmacology history and a dedicated institute to pharmacy research and nutrition with one the famous experts on microbiota conducting research at the university. To be more specific, this research is working on obesity and treatments related to it.

Around the world there is an increasing trend of the healthcare industry developing partnerships with universities to collaborate on research projects and drive innovation. How important is it for UC Louvain to establish such relations?

As a university, I strongly think it is important to collaborate with both internal and external players. Within UCLouvain it is very coherent for the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry to collaborate with research institutes that are part of UCLouvain. The fact the faculty is surrounded by research institute makes collaboration quite natural. It also goes without saying that collaboration is a strength as it allows for access to more researching funding from Belgium and Europe. This also applies to our work with other Belgian and European universities for instance.

Looking internationally, how do you view Belgium’s research and innovation environment compared to other sophisticated countries in Europe such as Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands?

Belgium is an environment that fosters innovation; we do have our strength. We are somewhat less bureaucratic than other European countries in the overall process of research and innovation.

Therefore, we manage to be competitive in achieving research grants and funding from the European Union to support our projects and to become pioneers.

Furthermore, the expertise of our doctors and researchers are well recognized abroad. When we partner with other universities or when our students go abroad for an exchange or practice experience, young doctors trained at UCLouvain are recognized for their skills. I think it demonstrates that on an international level, Belgium does foster excellence in its health sector.

Despite these facts, funds from Belgium can be lacking or be better allocated, which can become a real blocking parameter for healthcare research.

What objectives are you aiming to achieve during your tenure for the faculty as an educator of the next generation of health professionals?

Of course, the role of the faculty is to teach, we foster excellence in education for our students. We must take as one of our priorities, our ability to teach and share our knowledge to students. New generations of students have changed; therefore, we must adapt our way of teaching in order to capture and deliver relevant information to them.

Furthermore, I would say that medicine studies have been shaken up when reducing the number of years to graduate from seven to six. Indeed, while medicine knowledge is growing at a fast rate, Belgium as all other European countries reduced the amount of years to teach it. It is complex to ensure that we pass on the knowledge in an appropriate way.

I think the solution is mainly about teaching the right thing at the right moment. We need to determine what are the thresholds and necessary skills. In other words, what should be known at the end of the bachelor’s degree, what should be known when graduating from master’s degrees, and what knowledge is necessary to enter a master’s specialization.

In addition, I believe that we are facing a tension when it comes to the time professors can spend teaching students. For several reasons, clinical pressure on professors also taking care of patients at university hospitals has strongly increased which requires from the university an ability to ensure that professors will still have time to teach.

Is there any final message you would like to deliver about UC Louvain?

For the time being, we are able to train qualified and caring doctors. The priority is and must remain patient care, but in order to ensure it will remain that way in the future, we must improve

the teaching conditions we have now.

I believe the government should ensure the support of education as prerogative; indeed, it is crucial that our doctor in Belgium receive the right education to ensure patient care.

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