



From Research to Impact: StartLab.Brussels Academics as an Entry Point to Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium

Abstract

StartLab.Brussels Academics is a pre-incubation programme developed within the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and StartLab.Brussels entrepreneurship ecosystem to support researchers in exploring entrepreneurship and translating research into societal and economic impact. Positioned within the broader StartLab.Brussels incubator, the programme provides early-stage entrepreneurial support through workshops, coaching, mentoring, and access to external experts and networks. Structured around the Explore, Build, and Grow model, it enables participants to develop entrepreneurial competences, validate ideas, and engage with innovation ecosystems in a low-risk environment. The case highlights how universities can strengthen entrepreneurial culture among researchers, build pathways between academia and innovation, leverage existing incubation initiatives and create long-term capacity for knowledge valorisation and spin-off development through flexible and people-centred support structures.



Authors: Thomas Crispeels,
Maarten De Ruyck, Arne Pauwels,
Natalya Sharovatova

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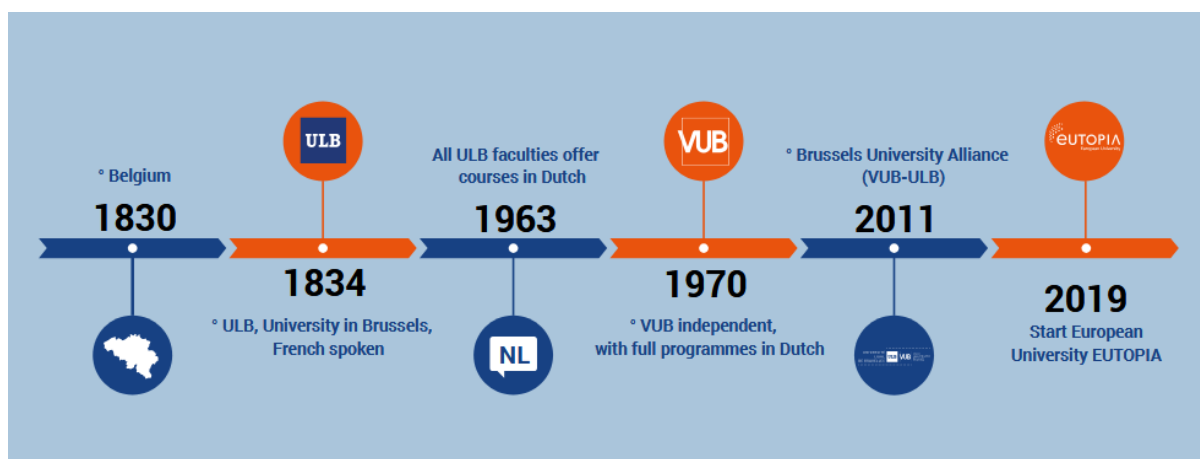
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Institutional Profile

The [Vrije Universiteit Brussel \(VUB\)](#) is a public research university located in Brussels, Belgium, characterised by its strong commitment to academic freedom, internationalisation, and societal engagement. VUB hosts a diverse and steadily growing academic community of over **24,000 students** enrolled in more than **150 programmes** across a wide range of disciplines. The university is notably **international in character**, with approximately **24%** of its student population – around **5,950 students** – coming **from 151 different countries**. VUB's international orientation is also reflected in its academic offer, which includes English-taught master's programmes and joint programmes with ULB, as well as doctoral pathways embedded in an international research environment, including joint PhDs with partner institutions. The university's development reflects its transition from a French-speaking institution to an independent university with full programmes in Dutch, marked by key milestones such as its independence in 1970 and participation in the [EUTOPIA Alliance](#) (see **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**).

FIGURE 1. VUB FACTS & FIGURES 2024–2025



Source: [VUB 2024 – 2025](#)

The institution employs around **4,000 staff members** and has built a global alumni network exceeding **80,000 graduates**. VUB maintains a dynamic research environment, with more than **2,300 doctoral researchers contributing to interdisciplinary knowledge production**. The university is highly active in **international research collaboration**, particularly within European frameworks such as **Horizon Europe**, through which it has secured substantial funding and participated in numerous collaborative projects. **Internationalisation** is a core strategic priority at VUB. The university actively promotes mobility through exchange programmes such as **Erasmus+** and maintains partnerships with institutions worldwide, facilitating both incoming and outgoing student exchanges.

Introduction to StartLab.Brussels

StartLab.Brussels: Enabling Early-Stage Innovation

StartLab.Brussels is an early-stage incubator dedicated to **empowering first-time entrepreneurs and academics** to transform bold ideas into impactful ventures. Through tailored coaching, training, and access to a collaborative ecosystem, it supports individuals in developing startups that contribute to innovation and positive societal change. Central to its approach is a strong **value-driven culture** that emphasises care, collaboration, creativity, and action.

StartLab.Brussels **Values** highlight four core principles: **We care**, **We share**, **We dare**, and **We act**. These values reflect a people-centred approach, fostering integrity and sustainability (*We care*), encouraging knowledge exchange and community building (*We share*), promoting innovation through bold thinking (*We dare*), and supporting individuals in turning ideas into tangible impact (*We act*). Together, they underpin the incubator's mission and guide participant experience. Importantly, StartLab.Brussels is a collaborative initiative by Brussels' two largest (sister) universities: Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).

The StartLab.Brussels Story

Driven by passion, collaboration, and innovation, the journey began at Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in 2002 with the establishment of the Start Academy – a pioneer initiative designed to promote entrepreneurial awareness among students. In 2016, ULB further advanced this vision by launching Start.Lab, its inaugural incubator dedicated to student entrepreneurs. In parallel, existing entrepreneurship initiatives at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) led to the launch of Start.VUB in 2018, with a similar purpose as Start.Lab.

In 2022, these two incubators merged to form StartLab.Brussels, a trilingual initiative (French, Dutch, and English) jointly led by ULB and VUB and supported by academic founders Prof. Olivier Witmeur (ULB) and Prof. Thomas Crispeels (VUB). The target audience of the incubator at that moment were young entrepreneurs such as students, alumni or Brussels youth.

Currently, StartLab.Brussels serves as a cohesive and vibrant hub that empowers first-time entrepreneurs and academics from diverse backgrounds.

StartLab.Brussels Academics Track within StartLab.Brussels

Introduced in 2024, [StartLab.Brussels Academics](#) (also referred to as the academic track within StartLab.Brussels) was established to address a structural gap in university entrepreneurship support: the lack of early-stage pre-incubation pathways for researchers.

It **responds to challenges researchers face when moving from research to market-oriented activities**, particularly regarding intellectual property, market validation, and engagement with external stakeholders. The programme operates in an environment characterised by technology-driven initiatives, business-to-business models, and a long-term growth orientation, where external funding, specialised infrastructure, coaching, and co-founding teams are often important.

The programme supports early-stage academic spin-off projects emerging from university research. Its initial focus is on market validation, helping researchers explore market opportunities, understand customer needs and industry dynamics, and assess the relevance and viability of their ideas before scaling. As projects mature, growth-related needs such as funding, infrastructure, and strong co-founding teams become increasingly important.

From a technology transfer perspective, the programme supports the **university's mission to translate research into societal and economic impact**. Spin-off creation contributes to knowledge valorisation, industry collaboration, and access to innovation-related funding. Recognising that spin-off development often depends on individual initiative, the programme aims to create a systematic and visible pipeline that encourages, supports, and tracks entrepreneurial development, helping researchers turn academic work into real-world applications.

Rationale

A key element of the rationale is the **recognition that entrepreneurship is not a default or immediate pathway for most researchers**. Approximately half of the academic programme participants (in total 25) initially join the programme to **explore whether entrepreneurship is a suitable career option**. This exploratory dimension is therefore intentionally embedded in the design, allowing participants to **test their motivation and capabilities** in a low-risk environment. In doing so, the programme contributes to a broader cultural shift in which entrepreneurship becomes a legitimate and visible career pathway within academia. This also means that participants' ideas and motivations can come from multiple sources. Some researchers work on spin-off projects (start-ups based on research results), some work on their proprietary ideas.

At a systemic level, the initiative addresses a critical gap between **early-stage idea exploration and more advanced incubation or acceleration programmes**. By positioning itself as a pre-incubator, StartLab.Brussels Academics acts as a bridge between academic research and the entrepreneurial ecosystem, enabling a gradual transition from university-based research to externally oriented innovation activities.

Initiative Description

StartLab.Brussels Academics is a **one-year programme** aligned with the academic calendar and divided into **two semesters**. It includes **ten workshops**, individual coaching, and opportunities to engage with experts and peers.

In the **first semester**, participants are introduced to core entrepreneurial concepts such as value proposition development, market analysis, intellectual property, and customer engagement. A strong emphasis is placed on customer interviews, encouraging participants to explore their ecosystem and test market assumptions. The programme also develops presentation and storytelling skills to help researchers communicate their ideas clearly to different audiences. The **second semester** focuses on more advanced topics, including team formation, business modelling, funding strategies, and preparation for final presentations.

The programme concludes with a **final pitch session**, where participants present their projects to an internal and external jury composed of programme managers from StartLab.Brussels, experts from VUB, and experts from other incubators and organisations in the Brussels ecosystem. This serves both as a learning experience and an opportunity to receive structured feedback. Afterwards, participants take part in **one-to-one follow-up sessions** to assess progress and identify further support needs. Depending on their stage of development, they may be referred to additional coaching, advisory boards, funding opportunities, or external incubators.

The programme is delivered by a small but interconnected team. A **programme manager** coordinates activities, supported by coaches, including spin-off coaches, as well as founders and experts from the StartLab.Brussels network. **External speakers** provide specialised input, and participants can access a broader pool of experts. The programme is embedded in both the StartLab.Brussels infrastructure and the university's tech transfer ecosystem, providing access to networking opportunities, co-working spaces, and expert support.

Recruitment and Selection

Recruitment combines proactive outreach with organic applications submitted through an open call running from June to September. In the early phase, considerable effort was needed to identify and engage researchers, including through collaboration with business developers and research groups. As awareness increased, so did applications. **Selection** is based mainly on motivation and relevance, with intake interviews used to assess participants' basic understanding of entrepreneurship and business concepts and their fit with the programme. **Eligibility** is generally limited to individuals affiliated with the university to protect confidentiality and intellectual property. The target group comprises PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers, although business developers within research groups are also eligible to participate in the programme.

The programme is **inclusive** in terms of disciplinary background and project type. Participation is free of charge. While primarily focused on research-driven ideas, it also welcomes broader entrepreneurial interests, meaning participants do not need to work on projects directly linked to their research. In its first year, the programme received **20 applications**; in its second, **35 applications**, from which **25 participants** were selected. By comparison, StartLab.Brussels' first-time entrepreneur programme receives around **300 applications per year**. Its distinctive feature is its **early-stage focus**: rather than supporting already developed projects, it focuses on individuals and their potential to become entrepreneurs, with particular emphasis on skills, mindset, and early validation through engagement with customers and stakeholders.

Explore, Build, and Grow Track Model

Beyond the cohort-based programme structure, StartLab.Brussels Academics is embedded in the broader three-track model developed at StartLab.Brussels – [Explore, Build, and Grow](#) – which supports researchers at different stages of their entrepreneurial journey.

The **Explore track** targets individuals who are curious about entrepreneurship but may not yet have a concrete idea. It lowers the entry barrier by allowing participants to engage at their own pace and level, helping them assess their interest and potential. Designed as an accessible starting point, it will primarily be offered online by the end of 2026, complemented by a few in-person moments for deeper guidance and interaction. Its main purpose is to help participants develop stronger project ideas or early concepts that can later progress into the **Build track**.

The **Build track** corresponds to the core programme, where participants develop and validate their ideas through workshops, coaching, and interaction with experts and stakeholders.

The **Grow track** is designed for participants with more advanced or validated concepts, offering tailored support such as advisory boards, mentoring, and further development opportunities to help turn early ideas into sustainable ventures. Projects enter this track alongside those from the general StartLab.Brussels programme, helping them move beyond the university environment into the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem.

This staged approach allows participants to enter at different points and progress as their ideas mature, reinforcing the programme's role as a flexible, pathway-based entry point into the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Comprehensive Support Services

In addition to the core programme, participants have access to a range of [Supplementary Support Services](#).

Coaching sessions provide an environment for growth and learning, with experienced coaches helping participants address challenges and strengthen their skills.

Through **master classes**, participants can choose tailored sessions in areas such as digital marketing, sales, pitching, business models, and finance and funding, depending on their needs.

The **Experts' Squad** offers access to specialised advice on topics such as finance, marketing, and legal matters, providing support for more specific challenges.

Events at the Lab create networking opportunities, enabling participants to connect with peers as well as potential investors, clients, and partners, including business angels, venture capitalists, and representatives of other incubators and accelerators in the Brussels ecosystem, such as MedTech Accelerator, FARI AI Accelerator, and imec.

Participants also have access to **co-working spaces**, which supports both growth and interaction with fellow entrepreneurs. Reservable meeting rooms are available for meetings with clients or guests.

Impact and Success Factors

Internal and External Impact

Within the university, the programme has increased the **visibility of entrepreneurship as a viable pathway for researchers**. Through information sessions, workshops, and the presence of active cohorts, entrepreneurship has become more visible in the academic environment. Participants also act as ambassadors within their research groups, helping to raise awareness and encourage participation.

At the individual level, participants develop both **hard** (core entrepreneurial knowledge and methodologies, such as business model development, value proposition design, market analysis, and venture planning) **and soft** (customer interviewing, storytelling, networking, communication, leadership, and relationship-building) **entrepreneurial skills**, including customer communication, problem identification, and project structuring. A particularly important outcome is their **improved ability to engage with external stakeholders** through customer interviews and market validation activities. Feedback from funding bodies also suggests that participants who have completed the programme demonstrate **stronger entrepreneurial understanding and communication skills** when applying for innovation funding.

Externally, the programme **strengthens connections** between the university and the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. Participants engage with industry representatives, attend conferences, and interact with potential partners. Early indicators of success include **participation in external acceleration programmes and recognition through awards**.

Participation figures also indicate growing interest. The first cohort included around **20 participants**, of whom **12** presented a final pitch. The second cohort attracted **35 applicants**, with **27 participants** starting and around **15 to 17** completing the programme. These figures suggest increasing demand and improved visibility. Participants receive a certificate upon completion, and the course also qualifies for PhD career development credits, which may further enhance its attractiveness to prospective participants.

At the same time, StartLab.Brussels Academics is designed as an **early-stage intervention**. Its main impact therefore lies in **building a pipeline of entrepreneurial talent** rather than generating immediate spin-offs. Company creation is a longer-term outcome that is expected to materialise over several years, reflecting a strategic focus on capacity-building and talent development.

Participant Feedback and Early Outcomes

After each programme cycle, **follow-up interviews** are conducted with participants to understand how they can continue to be supported and to gather feedback for further improvement. These conversations provide valuable insight into the programme's impact on researchers and their entrepreneurial development.

Several recurring themes emerge. Participants often highlight the **value of stepping outside** the university environment and being exposed to a different way of thinking. They also emphasise the programme's **accessible and practical nature**, as well as the value of **group dynamics, peer learning**, and **interaction with experts and external speakers**. The hands-on methodology is particularly appreciated, as participants are encouraged to test, do, and engage rather than only follow a theoretical course on entrepreneurship.

Overall satisfaction after participation is high. Although long-term success remains difficult to measure at this stage, encouraging signs are already visible. Researchers who complete the programme appear **better prepared** when applying for **regional innovation mandates**, such as [VLAIO Mandate](#) and other **funding mechanisms**, such as [ERIS support for European research and innovation funding](#) supporting the translation of research into market applications. Participants gain a clearer understanding of market expectations, identify gaps in their knowledge, and become more aware of further development and validation needs.

Success Factors

Several factors contribute to the programme's success. One is its **positioning outside the traditional academic environment**. By operating within the StartLab.Brussels setting, participants are exposed to a more entrepreneurial culture and encouraged to step beyond their usual academic routines.

A second factor is the **strong emphasis on experiential learning**. Direct interaction with customers and stakeholders helps participants move beyond theoretical assumptions and

develop a more grounded understanding of market needs. External speakers and founder testimonials further strengthen this approach by offering realistic perspectives on entrepreneurial journeys, including both opportunities and challenges.

Institutional support is another important success factor. The programme is funded by the university's tech transfer office and benefits from the broader support of StartLab.Brussels, which is largely funded by the regional government. This long-term commitment allows the programme to focus on building a sustainable pipeline of entrepreneurial talent rather than short-term financial returns. As of 2025, the programme is also included in the formal PhD training at VUB.

Another concrete indicator of success is that some researchers **continue their entrepreneurial journey after StartLab** by joining other incubators and accelerators in the region that support projects at more advanced stages of development. One team, for example, first explored and validated its project within StartLab before joining an accelerator programme, where it later won [a jury prize](#) (MedTech Accelerator 2025). This illustrates how StartLab can function as an important first step in a broader entrepreneurial pathway.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges and Mitigation Approaches

One of the main challenges in implementing the programme has been **engaging researchers and raising awareness of entrepreneurship** as a relevant activity. In the early stages, significant effort was required to recruit participants, including direct outreach and collaboration with research groups. Over time, this challenge has been mitigated through **increased visibility and positive word-of-mouth**.

Another challenge relates to **aligning the programme with the schedules and expectations of researchers**. The timing of sessions was initially uncertain, but experience has shown that **daytime sessions** are more effective, as participants perceive them as part of their professional responsibilities.

Language diversity can be difficult to manage, especially in academic settings where multiple languages are spoken. Achieving smooth communication and collaboration means paying close attention to how language is used. Currently, **English** serves as the primary tool for bridging these gaps.

Confidentiality and intellectual property protection are additional concerns. Restricting participation to **individuals affiliated with the university** helps mitigate risks and ensures that participants can share sensitive information in a secure environment.

Lessons Learned

A key lesson learned is the importance of **early engagement with researchers**. Introducing entrepreneurial thinking during earlier stages of academic careers, such as during PhD studies, allows participants to better align their research with potential applications.

Another insight is the value of maintaining **flexibility in programme design**. Allowing participants to explore different types of projects and career paths supports broader engagement and encourages experimentation.

The programme has also highlighted the need for **long-term commitment and realistic expectations**. Developing successful spin-offs requires time, and short-term evaluations may not fully capture the programme's impact.

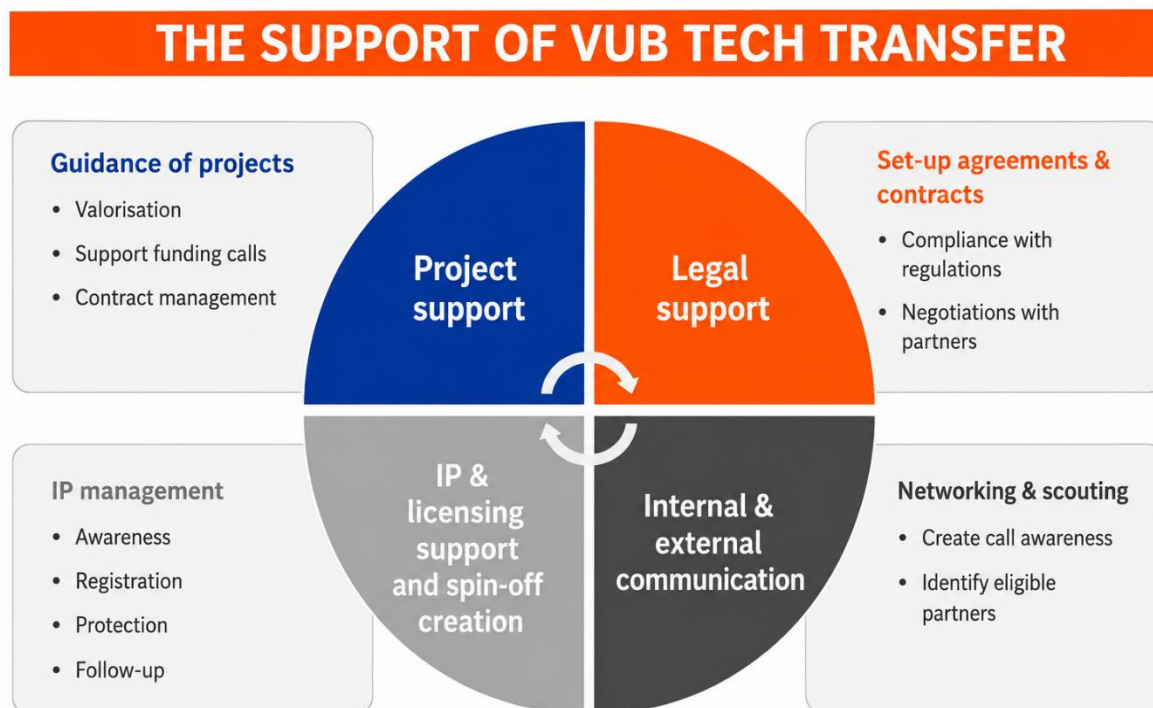
The close interaction between the programme managers and the **Technology Transfer Office (TTO)** also ensures that the pipeline of spin-off potential becomes more visible and that bottlenecks, knowledge gaps, funding opportunities, policy implications that influence entrepreneurship at the institution are quickly identified. Importantly, there exists a **"wall"** between the StartLab.Brussels Academics team and the TTO. Descriptive information about participants and their projects is shared (name, project, status, etc.), but confidential information (market, customers, financials, etc.) remains private. In this way, an **environment of trust**, where the participants feel free to explore and try without having to worry about its impact on future negotiations or valuations is guaranteed. This also means that the StartLab.Brussels Academics team is not involved in the formal spin-off process within TTO.

Sustainability, Scalability, and Transferability of StartLab.Brussels Academics

Sustainability

StartLab.Brussels Academics is sustained through a combination of institutional and public funding. The academic track is fully funded by the university's [Tech Transfer Office](#), reflecting its strategic importance (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. THE SUPPORT OF VUB TECH TRANSFER



Source: Internal Kick-Off Presentation of the StartLab.Brussels

The broader StartLab.Brussels initiative receives the majority of its funding from the regional government, supplemented by contributions from foundations and sponsorships. This funding structure ensures the continuity of the programme while allowing flexibility in its design and delivery. At least for the foreseeable future, the funding is inscribed in the TTOs recurrent budget.

Scalability

The programme has potential for expansion in terms of **participant numbers** and **institutional collaboration**. However, scalability is constrained by the need to maintain an interactive and personalised learning environment. Managing larger cohorts would require additional resources or structural adjustments, such as splitting groups or expanding the team. Efforts are underway to extend collaboration with partner institutions, including a sister university (ULB), with the aim of scaling the programme to a regional level.

Transferability

The model of StartLab.Brussels Academics can be transferred to other universities, provided certain conditions are met. These include **strong institutional support, access to an entrepreneurial ecosystem** ideally through an existing university initiative, and **collaboration with tech transfer offices and external partners**. The pre-incubation focus and emphasis on skill development are particularly transferable elements.

Future Activities and Next Steps

Looking ahead, StartLab.Brussels Academics aims to refine and expand its three-track approach – **Explore, Build, and Grow** – while strengthening its role as an entry point into the entrepreneurial ecosystem for researchers. A key priority is the continued development of the **third cohort** and better integration across the programme's stages, especially smoother transitions between the exploratory phase, the core programme, and advanced support for validated ideas.

The programme also aims to further develop the **Grow track** by formalising **follow-up support**, including advisory boards, tailored coaching, and clearer pathways to external incubators and funding opportunities. Strengthening these post-programme elements, while also mixing researcher-entrepreneurs with other entrepreneurs, is expected to enhance longer-term impact and support progress towards spin-off creation.

Efforts will also continue to increase awareness of and participation in the **Explore** and **Build** phases, particularly among researchers at earlier career stages. This includes strengthening collaboration with research groups, business developers, and institutional stakeholders to ensure a steady pipeline of participants.

Another priority is to **strengthen StartLab.Brussels Academics' position within the regional and institutional ecosystem** by deepening collaboration with partner institutions, including possible expansion towards a more regional model, and clarifying its role in relation to other support initiatives.

Overall, future activities will focus on strengthening continuity across the programme's stages, improving ecosystem integration, and gradually supporting entrepreneurial engagement, innovation funding, and spin-off creation.

Contact Details and Resources

Contact Details

Prof. dr. Thomas Crispeels

StartLab.Brussels Director, Board Chair



Thomas.Crispeels@vub.be



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Maarten De Ruyck

StartLab.Brussels Academics Programme Manager



Maarten.De.Ruyck@vub.be



[Connect on LinkedIn](#)



Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Arne Pauwels

StartLab.Brussels Academics Spin-off coach

 Arne.Pauwels@vub.be

 [Connect on LinkedIn](#)

 Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Natalya Sharovatova

Project Manager, responsible for conducting interviews, analysing data, and structuring content for the development of case studies and user stories for the HEInnovate Project.

 natalya.sharovatova@che.de

 [Connect on LinkedIn](#)

 CHE – Centre for Higher Education, Germany

Caroline Friedhoff

Senior Project Manager, responsible for conducting interviews, analysing data, and structuring content for the development of case studies and user stories for the HEInnovate Project.

 caroline.friedhoff@che.de

 [Connect on LinkedIn](#)

 CHE – Centre for Higher Education, Germany

Resources

1. [A jury prize](#) (MedTech Accelerator 2025)
2. [ERIS support for European research and innovation funding](#)
3. [EUTOPIA Alliance](#)
4. [Explore, Build, and Grow](#)
5. [StartLab.Brussels Academics](#)
6. [Supplementary Support Services](#)
7. [VLAIO Mandate](#)
8. [Vrije Universiteit Brussel \(VUB\)](#)
9. [VUB 2024 – 2025](#)
10. [VUB Tech Transfer Office](#)