**Opening Speech AI Center**

**Donderdag 21 november – 16u00**

Dear Ladies, Gentlemen,

Dear Guests,

Dear Colleagues,

It is my pleasure to welcome you at the formal opening event of the VUB AI Experience center.

The diversity of this audience - policy makers, representatives from funding agencies from different governmental institutions as well as representatives from industrial and network organisations, reflects what the AI Experience Center embodies. This location, this platform, allows interaction between all the stakeholders from the Open Innovation Ecosystem. This center fosters research and innovation, and creates the opportunity to explore and debate and to shape the socio-economic impact of Artificial Intelligence.

In 2018, the EC Digital Single Market Initiative highlighted the importance of the collaboration on Artificial Intelligence, Data and Robotics. Europe still has a world market share of 33% in robotics, 30% in embedded systems, 55% of automotive semiconductors, 20% of semiconductor equipment and 20% of photonics components. However, Europe faces challenges such as the existing differences in the level of digitalization of industry across sectors, member states and regions. Moreover, only 1 out of 5 companies across the European Union are highly digitized. Around 60% of the Large Industries and more than 90% of the SME’s feel to be lagging behind in digital innovation. Our European industry cannot afford to lose leadership in digital industrial platforms. It is estimated that 90 % of future jobs will require some level of digital skills while 44% of Europeans lack basic digital skills.

The objective of the AI experience center is to contribute to additional innovation instruments, such as the setup of European Digital Innovation Hubs, the development of a regulatory framework that fits the digital age and the creation of partnerships and industry platforms. In addition, upskilling the workforce and piloting EU initiatives to show how education systems could respond to the digital needs of Europeans will also be a focus of the experience center.

At the VUB, we strive to combine our strengths in research and innovation in the field of Artificial Intelligence, Data and Robotics for economic and societal stakeholders, with an AI Experience Center as a catalyst, facilitator and attraction pole.

The AI experience center is an important new instrument in the research and innovation ecosystem, and we believe it to be the first of its kind in Brussels and Belgium. The AI Experience Center has been initiated by our four multidisciplinary research groups, AI Lab, Brubotics, SMIT and ETRO. Combing expertise from social sciences to computer sciences and engineering, the center is going to evolve from a demonstrator’s setup with educational and training services into a research & test laboratory. This lab will help new and established companies and organisations further in their search for relevant and applicable AI driven solutions. By doing this in a well-planned, stage-gated approach and with different stakeholders, we trust that the AI Experience Center will evolve into an innovation hub.

The original idea came from Professor Ann Nowé, head of the VUB AI Lab, the Lab which, as most of you know, was established by Luc Steels in 1983 and is internationally acclaimed for its innovative and multidisciplinary approach towards the young scientific field that AI is. The idea of creating an AI Fab Lab, which later evolved into the idea of an AI Experience Center, dates back from 2014. In the iCity Brussels Feder project proposal, the role and innovative character of an AI Fab Lab has been deployed and later on it became part of the AI Industrial Research Fund Project Rainbow, in 2016. Developing input for the Flanders AI Plan from 2017 and 2018 onwards, helped the creation of the concept a full-fledged AI Experience Center.

It is thanks to the expertise and research track record of over 200 researchers that represent these 4 mentioned research groups, that this first important milestone can be achieved. The implementation of the lab will strengthen the position of the VUB as a leading university in the field of human centered AI research and education.

The multidisciplinary approach creates the opportunity to offer the right expertise to connecting industry players from large to small enterprises, as well as to start-up companies to facilitate and accelerate innovation in AI applications. This same multidisciplinary approach allows to group policy makers, the broader public and nonprofit organizations to debate the acceptance and to define opportunities and societal needs and how AI driven technologies can meet these needs. Through research, through innovation, through education and debate.

We therefore strongly support the definition of Artificial Intelligence as laid out by the European Parliament and the OECD. We consider autonomous systems, like robotics, to have found a place in what AI is all about. The role of our successful research group Brubotics will be crucial for the AI Experience Center. The last 5 years Brubotics has built a strong expert community of eight different research groups under the umbrella of human-centered robotics research with a strong focus on health and manufacturing. The research group SMIT, brings in their elaborate expertise in socio-economic and policy research on digital technologies. Innovation methodology, business modelling research and co-creation & living lab research are also crucial in future AI research. ETRO has a strong link with the national and international technology industry, more specifically in the field of signal processing. The application and innovation in AI technologies have become crucial.

The AI expertise of the VUB is not limited to these 4 research groups: during the past 5 years, many other research groups at the VUB have been working on applying AI in their field of research or are working on the societal and ethical impact of AI. The research groups in applied physics, bio informatics, digital mathematics are perfect examples of that, as well as research groups in economy (Data Analytics Lab) but also legal and philosophy research groups like LSTS and the research group ETHU are building the necessary expertise in AI and AI applications. And let’s not forget the many research projects at our university hospital in Jette, our faculty of medicine and pharmacy, were novel research projects in neurosurgery, medical imaging, radiology, fertility, and cardiology already implement an AI driven research approach.

Human-Centricity is what binds these research projects. In the true meaning of the VUB values, where both the human as the individual, as the community and society are central aspects of the research question; not the AI algorithm or technology in itself.

We will keep on collaborating intensively with our colleagues of the different ULB research groups, with whom we already have strong AI driven ties throught the icity.brussels project. Our successful collaboration on AI and BioInformatics in the IBSQAURE project is equally worth mentioning.

*(Mentioning of the AI for the Common Good initiative?)*

Brussels, our city, our European capital, gives us and in particular the AI Experience Center, the strong opportunity and challenge to reach out the European players in policy and industry. We believe this will be beneficial for the AI ecosystem of both Brussels and Flanders. We strive for International Excellence with local impact.

Being involved in the development of the Flanders AI Plan and being committed to take up our role in the execution of this plan, the AI experience Center and its further developments will allow the VUB to connect with other Research & Innovation centers in Flanders and Wallonia, with other universities and strategic research centers like for example IMEC, Flanders Make and VITO. Moreover, we are convinced that a more intensive collaboration with Agoria, Sirris and other digital innovation hubs will strengthen the AI innovation process in Belgium.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

AI challenges in society implicate that the dedicated academic researchers can reach out more efficiently when needed to policy makers, industry and the general public. Sometimes there is a sense of urgency in the societal and academic debate. The AI Test and Experience Lab has been defined as an appropriate space to do so. By hosting training sessions, workshops, Deep Dive Sessions and Opportunity workshops, we already answer these needs.

The vagueness that comes with AI technologies, calls for institutes with relevant expertise, such as the VUB, to carry the responsibility to create a space that emphasises the ramification of AI and that offers guidance and knowledge regarding AI applications.

**In conclusion**, the AI Experience Center will be crucial for future research and innovation of a more Human-Centric, transparent and relevant AI driven technology.

The research group leaders of AI LAB, SMIT, Brubotics and ETRO (in this order) will now introduce a few of the over 23 demonstrators currently present at the AI Experience Center.

In addition to these introductions, during the panel discussion Hans De Canck, manager of the AI Experience center, will elaborate on how the AI Experience Center will become an AI Innovation Center.

It is my pleasure to give the floor to Professor Ann Nowé, director of the AI Lab research group.

Thank you.