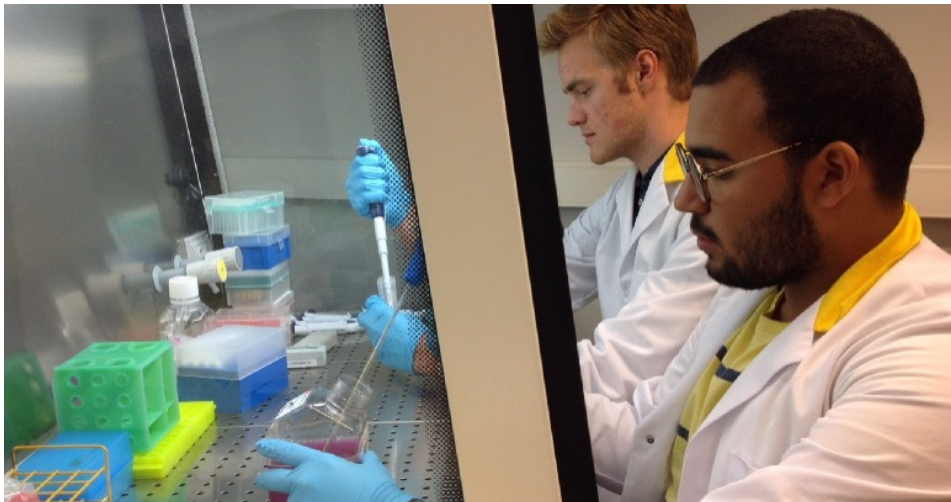


iGEM: a prestigious competition in synthetic biology



Entrepreneurship, for some it's in their blood, for others it feels almost unnatural. This is the story of thirteen students of the KU Leuven, and the journey they embarked upon to turn their dream into a reality.

iGEM, or “International Genetically Engineered Machine” is a prestigious contest that promotes biotechnological research alongside entrepreneurship. This international competition in Synthetic Biology has started since 2004 and is organized in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT, Boston). Teams from more than 300 universities worldwide compete against one another in developing a new genetically modified system. Such a system follows a different discipline each year, from genetically altered bacteria that fight cancer to 3D printing of biological tissues. Under the iGEM umbrella, all is possible.

Together with 3 other students from Bio-engineering sciences, I decided in May of 2016 with the aid of our university, the KU Leuven, to take part in the prestigious competition. It would later turn out to be an extremely hard task. For it wasn't until June of 2017 that our team first set foot in the lab. What originally began as a scientific project turned out to be a test in gathering contacts, finding sponsorships, building a team, and so much more... “iGEM, we're not doing that this year”, we heard that over and over again. “Sorry, we don't have the budget to take part this year”. So many discouraging comments came our way, till one day we received an email that redeemed our hope. Three professors saw something in our story and had decided to give us a financial push. Yes. With time, iGEM got more concrete, but with just the

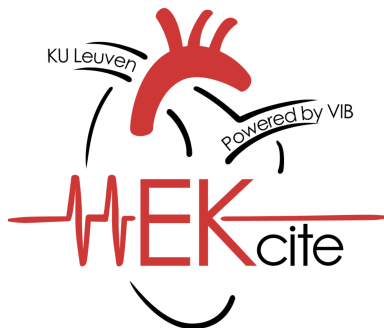
four of us, we couldn't move an inch further. We needed a team, quick. Avengers assemble!

Two months later, we were all over the different campuses in the university handing out flyers and organizing info-sessions to spread word about the competition. Finally, the interviews arrived, with the goal of hiring nine extra team members. There I was, accompanied by professors and ex-iGEM members, sitting around the applicant in a semi-circle formation, like vultures surrounding a prey. 'Why do we want you and not someone else?', I heard myself ask. A question that was tailed with a different response from every applicant. A question, that I myself, found extremely difficult to answer. Alas, the interviews were over, and from over thirty applicants, nine made it to the end. To make such an important decision on such a small stretch of time was definitely not easy. After all, how do you get to know someone in ten minutes?

Eight months after first hearing about iGEM, we finally had a team, ready for our project; and the dream had seemed to be a reality now. Biochemists, Bio-engineers, Civil and Industrial Engineers, Biomedical Sciences, and Medical students; every student following a different study track, having a different view, another motivation, and a whole new set of ideas. Every point of view had to be integrated into one big project, backed by every member, how would you tackle something like this? Eventually, it cost us about three months of brainstorming to end at the HEKcrite project.



As this is being written, we are working at full speed. Having spent 1 month in the lab already, it is becoming clearer that entrepreneurship is more than coming up with a "cool" idea. Whether we are going to succeed? A year ago, I would have answered this question with a firm NO. Today, I have a much more confidence in our project!



Curious as to what this HEKcrite project is all about? Make sure to follow this page! With the aid of two weekly blogs, and the power of social media, we will give you an insight on our journey to Boston. More information about us and our project can be found on our website: http://2017.igem.org/Team:KU_Leuven