

Brussels, 30th of September 2003



To the ULB and VUB research communities

Dear Professor,  
Dear Researcher,

I am writing to you as scientific director of DISC, Brussels' new interuniversity and interdisciplinary center dedicated to the knowledge society (see [www.brudisc.be](http://www.brudisc.be)).

DISC is a unique platform for a new kind of research that, I believe, will add a dimension to your already world-class academic work. It has received the highest level of support from both VUB and ULB, as well as from the Brussels' regional government.

With this letter I am soliciting your participation in a first series of ***DISC round table meetings***, all during the month of October, in order to help shape the DISC research programs so that they will be of most benefit to you and to your colleagues.

#### **Background: What is DISC?**

DISC is Brussels' first center dedicated to the knowledge society.

Knowledge is the basis for any knowledge society. Universities, as prime producers of public knowledge, must assure that their insights feed into the complex processes of creative change towards a better society for all. What is called 'the knowledge society' is not the result of this change; it is the condition that enables all to take part in this process.

With this mission in mind, DISC pools a vast range of expertise from its member institutes, ULB and VUB, to contribute to a joint exploration of insights, visions and practical options that present themselves at an ever more rapid pace. DISC also aims to actively contribute to the construction of a sustainable knowledge society, in the Brussels region and beyond. With a participatory, critical and open-minded attitude, it builds on the broadest possible basis, including citizens of all ages, small as well as large companies, governmental and non-governmental organizations and, of course, the world of research and education.

DISC develops four pillars of activity to implement research, dissemination, education and valorization strategies that are aimed at maximizing involvement as well as social and economic impact. This letter concerns primarily the research activities.

#### **Research: A transversal approach bridging vision and action.**

DISC focuses its own research programs on themes of particular socio-economical and cultural importance, like health, education, media, the individual and globalisation. Such DISC priority themes are transversal. They touch upon a wide range of disciplines (technology, hard and soft sciences) where each contributes its own methodology, objectives and research results. A first role of DISC is to be a forum for ongoing dialogue and a catalyst for a global understanding of different perspectives.

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DISC complements these researches with an exploration of long-term visions. What possible futures are enabled by ongoing research (realistic, utopian, distopian, short term and long term)? What are the key difficulties (scientific, technological, social, cultural,...) in realizing them? In what kind of conditions do they make sense? How could they chain together? How could one result from success or failure of another?

DISC also aims at concrete action in society, with active involvement of non-academia (citizens, companies, governments), in order to probe its real dynamics and change. The prevailing techno-optimism and the policies that this inspires are often naïve with respect to how science and technology get absorbed into society. At best complex processes of appropriation unfold; at worst plain rejection occurs with sometimes long-lasting effects.

**Priorities: The first DISC themes.**

Though DISC is open to work on topics of the broadest range within the scope of its mission, for its first year of activity (2003-2004) DISC is going to specifically develop activities around three themes.

1. WELLBEING AND HEALTH – in the medical domain science and technology touches most closely the intimate domain of body and mind. 'The medical' is expanding beyond illness and curing, into prevention and wellbeing. It is more and more of a permanent rather than of a punctual presence in our lives. Doctors are no longer the sole source of relevant knowledge. Medical information is more than ever multifaceted and the 'total' patient is documented in a fragmented manner. DISC wants to deepen top-level expertise in knowledge society technologies for health and wellbeing, and in the exploitation of the ICT infrastructure as a test bench for new R&D results.
2. MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION – digital media (image and other) are becoming the dominant carriers of information and knowledge. Digital communication is becoming more and more pervasive. But are media and communication really already the enablers of universal access to, and use of knowledge? For this, technological breakthroughs are still needed as well as a much better understanding of their role and impact from a social and cultural perspective.
3. EDUCATION – learning is obviously a pillar of any knowledge society. Anyone would agree that it is more than a way to transfer knowledge between the heads of people. Nevertheless, this is by far the dominant view when it comes to using ICT in education and training, and it accounts for many of the failures of e-Learning. To achieve truly effective uses of ICT for learning requires one to include much more than technological aspects, like conceptual, pedagogical, social, organizational and situational (e.g., spatial) ones.

**First steps: three DISC round table meetings.**

A priority theme is not just a scope of research and development. It is primarily a vision for a particular aspect of a future knowledge society. The visions indicated above are not yet very precise, and they need to be confronted and complemented with ongoing work within the ULB and VUB research communities.

In order to kick-start the development of a wide-ranging and visionary research program on the DISC priority themes, I am organizing a series of round table meetings with the VUB and ULB research communities. These will feed directly into the elaboration of the DISC research programs.

The purpose of these meetings is:

- To get feedback on the DISC research approach.
- To start mapping out relevant research at ULB and VUB.
- To collect elements of future visions for an umbrella DISC research program.
- To identify elements of convergence, synergy and/or divergence.
- To identify opportunities for interuniversity and interdisciplinary collaboration.

All meetings take place at the DISC Forum, Place Flageyplein 18, 1050 Brussels. The dates for these round table meetings are the following:

Wellbeing and health	Tuesday 21/10/2003	13:30 – 17:30
Media and Communication	Friday 24/10/2003	13:30 – 17:30
Education	Tuesday 28/10/2003	13:30 – 17:30

These are short delays – I am aware of that. I want to stress that these meetings are meant to be relatively informal and open to anyone of VUB or ULB actively involved in research. I'm targeting a mix of professors, young researchers, post-docs and laboratory directors. In order to participate you are requested to provide, prior to the meeting, a short 1-2 page position statement on the theme of your choice and rooted in 'your' discipline. The language for texts and discussions is English, French or Flemish.

Please confirm your participation to me at [wvdv@camporosso.be](mailto:wvdv@camporosso.be), indicating clearly which of the above round table(s) you will take part in. Please send your position statement to the same address.

I am looking forward to meeting you during one of the DISC round-table meetings.

Dr. Walter Van de Velde  
Scientific Director