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"Our future is shifting now to exporting technologies developed here to the United States and China"

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Creating a Technology-Based Enterprise (TBE) can represent a great opportunity for young university graduates seeking employment. These are the words of Francesc Medina, one of the founders of APLICAT, a Rovira i Virgili University TBE which provides solutions to environmental problems through catalysis. In the company's first five years, it has worked for 11 companies and billed 1.5 million euros. This year, turnover is expected to be between 400 and 500 thousand euros. The founders believe that creating the TBE was a good professional decision and is an excellent way to transfer technology generated in the university to the business sector. APLICAT has developed technologies in the region and hopes to now export these technologies to the rest of the world. They have already made contacts in Canada and Hong Kong.

The headquarters of APLICAT, founded five years ago, consists of one URV Foundation laboratory and two offices located on the Sescelades campus. Professor Francesc Medina and Sandra Ramos are two of the founders and two of the nine partners – primarily from the URV Heterogeneous Catalysis Research Group – who decided to set up the company. "Our group was involved in basic and applied research. We transferred our research to companies through the FURV" explains Medina. The group had potentially marketable technologies which would have been difficult to transfer from within the university: "You get to the point where you've done your laboratory research, you've scaled it, and it can't be transferred directly." The goal of the university, he said, "is not to sell technology" and the FURV offered the possibility of "creating your own company and doing it yourself."



In 2003, virtually the same group which formed APLICAT created an innovation centre, AMIC, and for three years this centre matured technologies. "A technology can either be sold or exploited" said the members. When they reached this juncture they chose to create the TBE. "Our knowledge comes from the URV. So, creating a company outside of the university with this knowledge would be disloyal." Ramos also added that for APLICAT "being linked to the university is an asset."

The company has been in business for five years now and the nine shareholders, including the URV, have invested their own money in the venture. "We're creating jobs and it's working out well. We think that it's been a positive experience and we would recommend it," says Ramos, who believes entrepreneurship needs to be demystified, "You just need time and drive, and to let go of your fear." However, having drive is critical, because funding is hard to find. Medina also believes that creating a TBE is a good idea for younger people. He is convinced that the future lies in people with ideas putting them into practice. "We have professionals who are ready and products that should be promoted."

The company was started with 12,000 euros from its partners, and more capital was added later to reach its current total of 157,000 euros. Part of this came from the contributions of the partners and part from the reinvestment of profits. "We were clear that the first five years had to be about investment and growth," said Ramos. The last two years have seen profits although the shareholders have yet to receive any.

Exporting technologies, the immediate future

One of the most important projects the company has taken on to date is the construction of the first catalytic water treatment plant for nitrate removal. The plant supplies drinking water to the municipality of Morell. Another similar plant has also been built. "This is an excellent model where basic research that began in the university ended up providing a public service," says Medina.

APLICAT is currently working with six businesses and two public administrations, the majority of which are from the region. "Our plan for next year is to expand internationally," explains Medina. The TBE hopes to export the technologies that it has developed and applied locally. It has already made contacts in Canada, and is considering constructing a plant fifty times the size of the one in Morell on a lake there. "This isn't a good time for public investment here. We have to look to industry and other countries with less restrictive financial situations," he notes. APLICAT has also made contacts in Hong Kong which are interested in this technology and others.

The company has taken a step further and taken the decision to finance its own research. The technologies exploited to date have been the result of university research, but now the company plans to do its own research. "The pace of the academic and industrial worlds is different. We can mature a technology from start to finish in a single year, whereas before it might have taken ten years," explains Ramos. Currently, APLICAT is working on developing technologies to treat industrial effluents, and on a technology which creates fuel from urban wastes.

APLICAT employs some extremely highly qualified personnel. "Almost everyone here has the highest level of qualification; they are doctors and engineers from the URV," says Medina, "if we can find qualified people here, there is no need for us to look elsewhere." They have taken on three employees and also subcontract research projects to the AMIC Innovation Centre as needed. "Our goal is to dedicate a portion of our profits to university knowledge transfer," says Medina. This is happening now at AMIC, "but we can't rule out the possibility that there may be other university groups which can provide what we need." This has been one of the company's commitments since its inception.

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Phone +34 977 29 70 11
C. de l'Escorxadador, s/n
43003 Tarragona

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info@ceics.eu

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