

CONVERSATION

“I want to see Light in the eyes of researchers!”



Talk with
**DOMINIQUE
NORA**

Weizmann
Institute of
Sciences,
Rehovot. 350
researchers and
students live on
the campus.

Daniel Zajfman, President of the Weizmann Institute of Sciences analyzes his particularly fertile research model

The Weizmann Institute is neither a university nor a research laboratory committed to a single field. How would you define it?

There is no universal way to carry out research, and that's good. Weizmann is focused on basic research in biochemistry, biology, chemistry, physics, math and computing and more. Without any immediate concern for practical applications. Our engine is above all curiosity! We try to understand our environment, to solve major scientific questions. And it's this basic work that eventually helps find solutions to some of humanity's major problems. It is somewhat the model of Bell Labs in the USA, from where emerged microwaves, the transistor and the in-depth learning of machines.

According to what criteria do you select your researchers?

The only rule is to find very high level people who have proved themselves abroad. Above all they must be curious, very keen, creative and multi-disciplinary. What interests me is not what they are looking for but who they are. I want to see the light in their eyes. Once recruited we give them the means to develop their dream. Our researchers enjoy complete academic freedom: Weizmann builds a laboratory

and tools around them. But they only get a permanent position if they achieve excellence.

The possibility of commercial possibilities from their work isn't taken into account?

No, we do not do applied research. However, we own one of the best patents portfolios in the world! Because when we push back the frontiers of scientific knowledge, we open up the way to technology transfers that revolutionize medicine, pharmacy, ecology, agriculture, and industry. We don't directly create any business, and we don't invest in those that use our inventions. But we do commercialize the operating licenses from our patents: 40% of these royalties go back to the researchers and 60% to the Institute.

So nonetheless it is a remunerative model...

Over the long term, yes: cumulative sales of all the products and services from work at the Weizmann Institute came to USD 35 billion in 2017, of which USD 1 billion was generated by 7 blockbuster drugs. The most famous example is Teva's Copaxone against multiple sclerosis, developed by the team of Michael Sela, Ruth Arnon and Dvora Teitelbaum. The most recent is Steba Biotech's Tookad against prostate cancer, the result of cross-fertilization of our work on plant photosynthesis and laser therapies.

To what extent are you subsidized by the Israeli government?

Our operating budget - 480 million euros per year - is only 25% covered by the government, as against 70% - 80% for the country's major universities. 35% of our resources come from our own investment funds (4 billion dollars, made up from royalties and philanthropic donations), 25% from international public contracts, brought in by teams through competitions. And the remaining 15% from private sponsorships or direct research contracts with industry.

Does industrial financing not influence your work?

We never allow our plans to be dictated. We recently refused 100 million dollars from the government of Singapore, which wanted to impose a research program. Weizmann works to maintain its vision and its model, without remaining in an ivory tower. Our Davidson Institute for Scientific Education has developed 70 programs, which every year affect 350,000 young people. Our researchers also regularly carry out scientific popularization in the bars of Tel-Aviv! ■

