In a hill on the Ewha Womans University campus, in a modern white building immaculate in its newness, Solvay is continuing the pioneer story it started in the 80s.

Back then, the Belgian chemicals and plastics company considered Korea a “pioneer country,” in the words of Solvay Korea’s representative director Andre Nothomb, and came here to develop new markets with commodity-based businesses that were traditional for Solvay.

Today, the company has located the headquarters of its Global Business Unit Special Chemicals in Seoul, on the campus of the largest women’s university in the world. The facility, construction for which was completed last December and which will be fully operational in May, is also home to Solvay’s Korean Research, Development and Technology (RDT) Centre.

Solvay invested EUR 13 million in this center and EUR 3.8 million in a 5-year, collaborative research fellowship with Ewha. Again in the pioneer spirit, it is the first, non-Korean private company to enter into this type of agreement with a Korean university.

“We have the ambition to grow more into this market and this region, and one reason why we are in Korea is that Korea, since the 1970s, has developed into a very complex ecosystem which generates so many more opportunities,” said Nothomb, who is also the Executive Vice President and Finance Officer of the Global Business Unit Special Chemicals. “So we must be here in various ways to allow us to take advantage. I mean, this investment of our R&D center is like a new start.”

Founded in the late 1970s, Solvay Korea includes three of the Solvay Group’s 18 business units and runs eight facilities. The largest, in Ulsan, manufactures various chemical specialties, among them Fluorine derivatives, another major product of Solvay’s Korean portfolio.

Solvay’s acquisition of the French specialty-chemicals manufacturer Rhodia in 2011 significantly expanded its presence in Korea, as Rhodia had operations here first and was larger than Solvay Korea at the time of the merger. Solvay Korea’s production and sales volume in 2013 totaled EUR 500 million, including exports. Employees number 500.

While Solvay Korea got its start with joint ventures with Korea’s conglomerates, Solvay’s decision to base its Special Chemicals business unit here stemmed from its successful partnerships with innovative and small Korean start-ups and SMEs over the years. They had high-tech technologies serving new product developments such as TV displays that didn’t exist in Europe. Solvay had the industrial skills to support their development from lab to industrial scale.

“It started with quite small seeds, and this experiment brought the attention to the Group top management,” said Nothomb. “Although we are surprised there are not so many companies that have done so, we are very happy with this business model.”

The RDT Centre will focus on high-growth markets, including electronics, photovoltaic cells and lithium ion batteries, a key area for the chemical industry, as the charge and capacity of a battery are determined by the chemicals used to develop it.

“For us, Korea, being a country where we use a lot of these batteries in the telephone, in the cars... it’s a good place to develop this battery technology because the customers are very much interested and they’re located here,” said Nothomb.

The idea of being here, near the conglomerates driving Korea’s top high-tech industries, is one the representative director keeps coming back to.

“In the past we noticed that the R&D made far away, it just doesn’t work. It’s too slow, that’s how we miss opportunities with our key customers,” said Nothomb. “If we want to be able to serve them in the longer term, we must develop the technology with them, hand in hand, and for this you need to be located here.”

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**Did you know?**

- Solvay is investing KRW 20 billion ($18.9 million) in a Korean technology venture capital fund that involves start-ups with promising technologies and focuses on renewable energy, printed electronics, clean technologies and green chemistry.
- Solvay, a 150-year-old company that posted net sales of EUR 9.93 billion in 2013, has supported numerous world-renowned scientists, one of whom was Marie Curie.