

FROM RESEARCH TO COMMERCIALISATION

From Research to Commercialisation in Health and Food Industries

What drives successful innovation in health or food? As a University with a reputation for excellent research in the fields of health and food, this is a question we consider regularly. Generally the debate over pathways of innovation from research to commercialisation tends to lurch between two extremes:

- a) Linear progress from basic research, for example where a laboratory investigation (whether in public or private sectors) leads to a discovery, perhaps a patent or licence, followed by subsequent development and then commercialisation (invariably these days in the private sector with VC money).
- b) The lone individual who has an idea, and develops it all (or almost all) the way to market with a little help from business angels and alike.

Both examples are demonstrably valid, but the reality is innovation takes a variety of forms between the above extremes and involves a variety of players. In our experience innovations may often start or be encouraged by the “spark” generated by interaction amongst professionals from academia and industry who may have a common desire to solve a problem or a belief they have “something special”. Alternatively, where innovation has already begun, a stage is reached where further development requires access to a wider range of skills and expertise in order to progress.

In October 2015 the CBI in its report ‘From follower to leader – Mapping the UK’s path to innovation leadership’ to the Comprehensive Spending Review made specific recommendations to achieve leadership including that the business community develop further engagement with Universities to get maximum benefit from this competitive asset.

In large organisations, interactions amongst diverse professionals to bring benefit to the business are a normal function of a successful company – including the scope for “chance interactions”.

But what about SMEs, where the opportunities for such interactions may be more limited? This is where universities can play a role, by developing links with innovative SMEs and introducing a different perspective.

The interaction between universities and SMEs is growing but it’s fair to say that there is still some way to go. With SMEs as the driving force of economic growth, and government promoting and tangibly supporting such interaction, Universities are keen to be do more to build these links.

Building such interactions with SMEs can be enhanced by universities doing six things:

1. Make it easy for SMEs to connect with universities. This includes providing a single point of contact at the university, such as the Knowledge Transfer Centre at the University of Reading, with a team able to directly support collaborations and also connect the company to the right people in order to engage and forge collaboration.
2. Connect networks of university senior academics to promote internal interactions and widen opportunities for cross-discipline collaborations.
3. Join with their Local Enterprise Partnership and host networking sessions that promote and support interactions with local companies.
4. Publish case studies of successful collaborations between SMEs and universities in the local business press, e.g. The Thames Valley Business Magazine.
5. Invite SMEs to attend careers fairs and engage with the students; Universities can tend to focus disproportionately on large corporates, but students can benefit by having access to a far bigger pool of opportunities for placements and employment with smaller companies.
6. University departments should collaborate with their business schools, as typically they are actively and widely engaged with its local SME community. By working together these teams can build positive and meaningful interactions.

At the University of Reading we've introduced a series of events to help SMEs engage with the University and our academics. Our first sector focussed event will be the 'Health and Food SME Forum' on Wed 17 February 2016, where business leaders will provide concrete examples of successful partnerships with the University to help us reach out to other local health and food SMEs. This will help us to support better future connections between Thames Valley health and food businesses and the University of Reading, a global top 200 University.

The University provides a wide range of services to health and food businesses, from specialist facilities (such as our food processing plant or our chemical analysis facilities) and services (such as patient-centred design or our statistical services centre), the opportunity to develop new ideas with academic staff and graduates through Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, the ability to recruit our graduates or provide student placements, or specialist staff training in food, health and business. We look forward to welcoming you to the University of Reading for the SME Forum.

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