

# Collaborate to innovate

*How can we encourage a free flow of people from universities into businesses and vice-versa? What can firms learn from philosophers? And why should we put an economic value on universities' cultural engagements as well as their inventions?*

These were some of the topics discussed at the inaugural workshop of the UK Innovation Research Centre (UK-IRC). Set up in early 2009 to carry out the highest quality research into innovation, the UK-IRC is a joint initiative by the Centre for Business Research at Judge Business School, University of Cambridge and Imperial College Business School. One of its key elements is a Knowledge Exchange Hub, which will actively disseminate its research findings.

Hub Director Michael Kitson says, "This was the first workshop held by the UK-IRC, aimed at sharing ideas on current innovation issues with an audience from academia, business and the policy community. We allowed plenty of time for discussions - and we were pleased at how animated some of these were, as attendees debated, for example, ways of building better relationships between universities and business. Future events will explore other issues to improve the innovation performance of the UK economy."

The workshop topic was 'How universities can influence business, innovation and competitiveness'. Speakers approached it from different angles. Dr Ammon Salter, Director of Research at the UK-IRC and Reader in Innovation Management at Imperial College Business School, discussed barriers to university-industry collaboration. It is difficult for academics and businesses to find suitable research partners, he said, so trust between the two sides is fundamental.

"Research is an uncertain process. As it involves trial and error you are not always going to get it right the first time: you might suggest things that look stupid later on, or find yourself going off on a tangent. So you need to work with partners who understand the research process and treat you with respect. The trust relationship is extremely important. As an academic you need to trust that your industrial partners are not going to give your ideas to another academic. As a business, you need to know that your academic partners are not going to share your commercially confidential information with other businesses."

## Building trust

Jeff Patmore, Head of Strategic University Research at BT Innovate, also talked about trust. He and his colleagues spend a significant amount of time with academics, he revealed – not just in Computing and Engineering, but also Philosophy. "Academics from the Faculty of Philosophy at Cambridge have worked with us in building bridges between sales and marketing people in BT's client companies and university academics looking at technology that could deliver value into their businesses." The relationship started,

he revealed, "about four years ago, when I attended a lecture on Trust. What came across was an incredibly deep understanding of how trust is created and how it is maintained. That triggered our initial relationship and we subsequently found that the Philosophers enjoyed working with us in building trusting relationships with our clients."

Both speakers were discussing collaborations - a theme also taken up by Dr Tim Minshall from the University of Cambridge Institute for Manufacturing. He discussed the nature of open, collaborative innovation based upon the experience of the Cambridge Open Innovation Network. "Businesses not only need to be located near to a university, but actively linking in to what's going on there, getting involved with joint research, networking with academics, or hosting student projects. It's really about physically moving people and getting them interacting together that makes the difference." To do this, he said, "Universities need to build a network of events and activities that encourages the free flow of people from the university into companies and vice versa so they can interact. If people aren't interacting with each other, innovation won't work."

And the discussion of interaction focused not only on how to encourage it, but how to measure it. This was a topic addressed by Ursula Kelly, Assistant Director (Policy & Communications) in the University of Strathclyde Information Resources Directorate.

In her research with colleagues, she said, "We have been trying to develop a broader understanding of how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) contribute to the economy and society. But we can only do that if we understand what they do and that means measuring their outputs." This measurement, she said, could be applied both to clearly commercial outputs like spin-off companies and to universities' cultural and community engagements.

"An economic evaluation can indeed look at value created by wider social and cultural activities. We can measure an output and then do a cost/benefit analysis of it. And that is beneficial: one can start to value the areas of HEI engagement that are not necessarily commercial and that actually makes us more aware of work that really should be appreciated but may otherwise be overlooked."

• The Centre is open to input and suggestions for future events. Please contact UK-IRC Event Manager Philippa Millerchip (email: [pm436@cam.ac.uk](mailto:pm436@cam.ac.uk)) or Michael Kitson ([m.kitson@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:m.kitson@jbs.cam.ac.uk)). For more information about the workshop, visit: [www.cbr.cam.ac.uk/news/UKirc\\_Workshop\\_4-5Jun09.htm](http://www.cbr.cam.ac.uk/news/UKirc_Workshop_4-5Jun09.htm)