

Knowledge Transfer in Ireland: Year-in Review

Unlocking Knowledge Transfer Webinar Series

December 2021

In the finale of the KTI Unlocking Knowledge Transfer webinar series for 2021, our expert panelists reflected on the performance of the Irish knowledge transfer system in year past. Our featured panelists were Alison Campbell, Director of KTI; Imelda Lambkin, Manager of the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund (DTIF) at Enterprise Ireland; Kevin Walsh, Head of Research Centres at Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and Jennifer Brennan, Director of RD&I at Technological Higher Education Association (THEA).

Alison Campbell opened by reflecting on the steady position of the knowledge transfer system over the year. Despite the circumstances presented by the pandemic in 2020, industry continued to display an interest in working with the third-level throughout both 2020 and 2021. Kevin Walsh had also seen an increase in the level of engagement between industry and academia in 2021 from the research perspective as he noted that this was the strongest year to date for SFI research centres in terms of business development with over 135 research collaboration agreements and €35 million in commitments to industry partners. Imelda Lambkin, also expressed some surprise at the level of business engagement with research, as Call 3 of the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund (DTIF) awarded €95 million, an increase on the previous year, to 29 projects across multiple sectors such as space and deep sea. From the research perspective, Jennifer Brennan noted there had been concerns about the impact COVID-19 might have on engagement with the Institutes of Technology and Technological Universities due to the barrier of accessing labs, but activity remained constant despite working from home.

Alison Campbell noted that repeat business engagement with research is very important for companies to constantly innovate, particularly as there are significant changes that companies will need to adapt to, such as digitalisation and sustainable operations, which is being hinted at externally from funders. Kevin Walsh emphasised that there had been significant repeat engagement from the industry partners who are happy with the outcome of previous collaborative research projects. He continued by highlighting that SFI had launched a second series of funding for 13 of the research centres, with the funding model mandated to increase the level of engagement with industry. He noted that Research Centres develop longer term partnerships with specific industry partners to continue business and research engagement over a longer period of time. Imelda Lambkin noted that industry has realised the scale of supports and resources available to them as she has observed avid, recurring users of the DTIF, particularly small high-tech companies.

The panel agreed that there is a good spread of engagement between companies and higher education institutions around the country. Kevin Walsh noted that a lot of the centres are based in various locations such as CURAM in Galway which is a hotbed for medical devices companies and CONFIRM which is hosted out of the University of Limerick. He also noted that large multinationals have begun to actively collaborate through connections made via the CONNECT research centre. Imelda Lambkin also observed that a lot of DTIF projects involving academic researchers are scattered throughout Ireland.

Alison Campbell revealed that the main priorities for KTI in 2022 for KTI will include evaluating performance and inviting an international panel to help KTI issue a call for proposals from the universities to support innovation offices in driving research commercialisation, the creation of new companies, licensing and collaboration. KTI will also be building out the Unlocking Knowledge Transfer webinar series with spring and autumn video series. There are also plans to update the suite of KTI template model agreements and practical guides to become even more user-friendly; to deliver another Annual Knowledge Transfer Survey; and annual KTI Impact Awards.

Looking forward to 2022, Imelda Lambkin noted that the main priorities for DTIF will be to manage a large project portfolio and move into some more specific themes for the next DTIF calls, such as sustainability and advanced manufacturing areas. The fourth call of DTIF is now open and closes in February. Kevin Walsh noted that in 2022, one of SFI's priorities will be to focus on the national research centres ecosystem and to develop a Phase 3 model for the research centres programme that will support them beyond 2025. In closing, Jennifer Brennan noted that in 2022, THEA's focus in 2022 will be on the Technological Universities and ensuring that they receive all the resources and support required in order to meet research and innovation requirements.

We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year and we will be back on the 10th of January with our next webinar on Patenting Trends across Ireland and Europe!

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