Driving innovation

One of the key challenges is to help small firms grow into medium sized companies

Distinguished biomedical scientist and Chief Executive of Innovate UK, Dr Ruth McKernan CBE, met with some of Scotland's own innovative SME's, homed-in on medical informatics and delivered a motivational masterclass at Edinburgh BioQuarter on Thursday 4th February 2016.

Organised by The University of Edinburgh Usher Institute's MRC-funded Proximity to Discovery Programme, Dr McKernan's visit included discussions with directors of medical informatics company Aridhia, biofuel firm Celtic Renewables and 'superfood of the sea' enterprise Mara Seaweed.

She was also briefed on the Usher Institute's industry engagement in China and how Edinburgh is positioned to support the development of China's healthcare sector – which aligns well with the China-UK strategic dialogue and initiatives encouraging innovative and commercial solutions to challenges that impact China's socio-economic growth and development.

In her masterclass, attended by senior University faculty, researchers, NHS staff and industry, Dr McKernan CBE focused on 'Options & Opportunities for driving innovation across the UK'.

She explained that one of the key challenges is to help small firms grow into medium sized companies. "Medium sized companies employ more people and pay taxes," stressed Dr McKernan.

Innovate UK will keep funding high risk projects so companies can "try something out," though the financial instruments are changing with loans being phased-in by 2020 to replace grants.

She underscored that the role of Innovate UK is "to innovate business rather than commercialise research" – and offered a rule of thumb that 20% of a proposal might target support for research, with the lion's share focused on innovating business.

Ruth McKernan became chief executive of Innovate UK, the UK's innovation agency, in May 2015. She was formerly chief scientific officer of Pfizer's Neusentis unit.

Ruth graduated from the University of London with a first in biochemistry and pharmacology. She gained her PhD at London's Institute of Psychiatry studying the mechanism of action of antidepressant drugs. A Fulbright Scholarship took her to the University of California in San Diego for two years and thereafter Ruth joined the pharmaceutical Industry. In her 20 years' experience she has held many posts including Head of the Merck Neuroscience Research Centre in the UK.

Before leading Neusentis, Ruth was site head and head of research at the company's former European R&D site in Sandwich, UK and before that held positions as vice president of biology in Sandwich, head of the research technology centre in Boston, MA and vice president for external research in Europe.

Ruth has been on the advisory board of several biotech companies and the Canadian Centre for Regenerative Medicine. She is also a member of the Medical Research Council, sits on the Cancer Research Technology Board, and is a visiting professor for King's College, London.

Scientifically, Ruth is best known for her research in neuroscience on ligand-gated ion channels with over 130 publications and 15 patents. She has also won awards for science writing and her first book for non-scientists, Billy's Halo, was short-listed for the 2007 MIND awards.

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