



# Research Will Help Business Compete

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An entrepreneur has argued that more science equals more economic growth, but only if managed properly. Lorna Siggins, Marine Correspondent, reports.

Why did a young Russian named Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, become the world's 26th richest person on the west coast of the United States? Why is university support for arts and humanities as important as scientific research?

And why is that glib catch-all phrase, "technology transfer," not sufficient when it comes to transforming research into economic growth?

Such questions were posed by British entrepreneur Stephen Allott at NUI Galway (NUIG) earlier this week, when he suggested that the economic impact of academic research could be increased substantially by using a focussed range of "people-centric" initiatives to complement links between third-level education and industry.

Six years ago in Lisbon, European heads of state agreed to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010," and earmarked a target of 3 per cent of European gross domestic product (GDP) on research.

Allott, a Cambridge University law graduate, entrepreneur and management consultant, believes money isn't enough to achieve this. Take the Google example, he says. Sergey Brin and Larry Page weren't good friends, but they did manage to meet and found the world's most successful search engine at Stanford University.

Significantly, Stanford students also founded Yahoo internet technology. So what was it about the college's environment that nurtured such innovation? He believes it was, and is, its people-centric approach – an approach that provided a most attractive environment for students such as Brin, and an approach which also avoided trapping and licensing intellectual property.

It was during a virtual "war" over intellectual property at Cambridge University that Allott first began to develop his theory, he explains.

The university wanted to adopt a patenting strategy which ran counter to all the basic principles of academic freedom. As a visitor on campus, Allott was invited to speak about the issue, and discovered that both sides in the conflict had very compelling arguments.

Allott found that "one size doesn't fit all," and the key to building a university-business interface is to recognise this. Geographical location, the creativity of its students, and ensuring support for disciplines like arts and humanities are also essential for creating an attractive environment for innovators, he believes.

Universities must also make places for entrepreneurs or risk takers – who aren't necessarily academically brilliant – and must market their post-graduate students, he says.

Businesses must in turn recognise the value of employing PhD students, he argues, and recognise they are not only buying expertise but also a relationship with a third-level institution.

If it sounds like common sense, Allott's thesis is borne out by academics here such as Dr James Cunningham of NUIG, who has identified it as "the new challenge on campus".

This challenge may have been overlooked during the bleaker years of forced economic emigration and a consequent "brain drain".

Despite many existing initiatives here, overall collaboration between enterprise and academia has been fairly limited, Dr Cunningham and co-author Brian Harney note in a book published this week to coincide with Allott's visit. Particularly worrying is the dearth of researchers in the Irish labour force, with fewer than five researchers per 1000 employed in the labour force – compared with more than 9.9 for Sweden and 9.6 per 1000 for Finland.

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