

Dr Rob Dekkers: Communicate and collaborate to innovate

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Innovation is not only on the agenda of governments, economic development agencies, companies and inventors, but it is also of eminent importance to address the challenges we face as a society, which range from health and poverty to sustainability and economic growth.

All of these challenges require novel solutions that look beyond the problems of today, even when we are sometimes inundated by the issues surrounding Brexit. However, even if this happens or not, innovation is key to the prosperity of the Scottish economy and the wellbeing of its people – such requires a wide variety of initiatives, perhaps changing mindset, and adequate policies. In this plea for more appropriate attention, however, a long-standing Scottish tradition in science and engineering should not be forgotten.

An example that attests to this is the renaming of the School of Engineering at the University of Glasgow after James Watt, who famously improved the steam engine – this led to the golden age of British industry during the first industrial revolution. Scottish inventors have also contributed to advances in civil engineering, communication, medicine and transport among others. Even today, innovative sectors, such as the gaming industry and medical devices, are blooming.

In addition to the world-class reputation of universities, the performance of companies seems reassuring. There are truly innovative firms. A case in point is Skyscanner, the company behind a website for finding the bests travel fares. Less well known is Clan Dynamics, a world-class supplier of handlers and robots for production. Some of the leading firms are subsidiaries of global companies, such as Diodes International in Greenock, formerly owned by Texas Instruments. This should put observers at ease that the Scottish economy is dynamic and ready for the future.

However, the Scottish economy, and for the matter also the UK economy, are seen as struggling when it comes to innovation, particularly, when compared with Germany, France, Japan and the USA. The productivity of the Scottish and UK economies also lags behind. This is also found in other indicators.

For instance, a doctoral study by Alessa Witt (University of Edinburgh), puts the so-called ‘hidden champions’ – innovative SMEs – at 50, whereas similar companies in Germany are counted as about 1500.

There are reasons why this falling behind happens. One could be the patchy nature of the industry, with universities and companies benefiting less from clustering. Another possible reason is the myopic perspectives embedded in Anglo-Saxon perspectives; short-term vision on profits clashes with the long-term vision for opportunities associated with innovation. A third reason is the skillset at all levels for innovation to happen. These three reasons could be leading to pessimism about the chances to become an innovative nation.

There are opportunities to address these cracks and barriers. First, innovation policies should facilitate the patchy character of the Scottish economy by enhancing cross-sector collaboration and by being responsive to the multitude of sectors and firms, rather than targeting only specific sectors. This also covers developing the suppliers base in Scotland and access to supplier networks beyond.

Second, initiatives for cross-sector collaboration, such as CeeD – the Centre for Engineering Education and Development – should be strengthened and expanded; this will help companies to learn from each other and new developments at universities.

Third, in this spirit, open collaboration should be encouraged and stimulated. One of the barriers mentioned during a clinic was the fear of losing control of intellectual property. However, there are positive solutions to this.

Furthermore, open collaboration builds on networks for innovation, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, contradicting the philosophy of Brexit. Policies should stimulate this based on facts and not on impromptu claims, as seems to be often the case nowadays.

Fourth, the skillset at all levels should be improved. Skills are more than having tablets and smartphones; they include coding and in-depth knowledge about software and hardware, even at elementary and secondary education.

Fifth, a culture of long-term vision for identifying opportunities for entrepreneurship based on technological insight should be stimulated. Perhaps such means departing from the spirit of Adam Smith and alike to foster innovation.

Only through such measures, but not limited to them, will innovation be in the hearts and minds of the Scottish people to form a transparent society based on meritocracy, sustainability, prosperity and well-being.

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