

## EMERGING ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Dr Michael Whelan, Technology Transfer Manager, WIT

Traditionally, Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) have been recognised as having two roles: the dissemination of knowledge through education, training and public discourse; and the creation of knowledge through research and scholarship. During the past decade, the so-called 'Third Role', namely that of pursuing a targeted agenda in the economic and social development of the region in which it is located has been much discussed. While many individuals in different HEIs over the years have played such roles, a defined and targeted role for the HEI itself is relatively new in the Irish context.

If any single event can be identified as the root cause for this discussion it was the 1980 passage of the Bayh-Dole act in the United States. This act allowed universities to directly control and benefit financially from commercialising the results of research performed using public funds. The premise of Bayh-Dole was that the public was not benefiting from the results of publicly funded research because it was to no-one's commercial benefit to exploit such results. The evaluation of the impact of Bayh-Dole in the US has been very positive when viewed on the national scale.

In the Irish context, state funding agencies have embraced the potential of the 'Third Role' in contributing to the future economic growth in Ireland and actively encourage such activities through numerous initiatives. As stated by Forfás in 2004, *"commercialisation of research and knowledge for Ireland's economic benefits through effective intellectual property management and technology transfer, needs to be a priority for all higher education and public research institutes"*. The Strategy for Science Technology & Innovation 2006-2013 clearly embraces this view-point: *"Ireland by 2013 will be internationally known for the excellence of research, and will be to the forefront in generating and using new knowledge for economic and social progress"*.

While the focus on the 'Third Role' has crystallised over the past several years in the Irish context, trends have been moving in that direction for some time. WIT has been at the vanguard of these trends. With the launch of the ArClabs Research and Innovation Centre in 2005, a facility in which

start-up companies and local entrepreneurs work and interact with staff from the TSSG and the Business School was created. Three Applied Research Enhancement (ARE) centres were also developed: 3Cs (Centre for Converged Communications Services), SEAM (South East Applied Materials) and PMBRC (Pharmaceutical and Molecular Biotechnology Research Centre). ARE centres, funded by Enterprise Ireland have a charter to build applied research expertise and capabilities and make this available to regional and national industry. In addition, the Technology Transfer Office was established within the Research Support Unit during 2008 to support intellectual property management and commercialisation activities across the Institute.

While the engagement of individuals and individual institutions is essential to impacting the region's future economic opportunities, they are not enough. Enhancing regional economic development inherently involves close cooperation amongst many stakeholders, e.g. HEIs, state agencies such as Enterprise Ireland and the IDA, local and national companies, entrepreneurs, enterprise boards, trade associations, in short the regional economic ecosystem. The Spirit of Enterprise forum, founded by WIT staff and regional stakeholders, is a prime example of the breadth of cooperation needed.

While the 'Third Role' extends the boundaries of the Institute, broadening its base of stakeholders possibly challenging previously held assumptions and practices, it has several characteristics in common with the First and Second Roles. It is more a journey than a task; the manner in which it is pursued must be in harmony with the local environment and culture; it will require flexibility and a willingness to be self-critical and can only benefit from vigorous debate. In follow up articles over the next several issues, we shall explore specific issues related to the Institute's 'Third Role' activities in more depth.

For more information contact:  
Dr Michael Whelan  
Email: [mwhelan@wit.ie](mailto:mwhelan@wit.ie)