Advocating academic entrepreneurship

Mark Downs (CEO, Royal Society of Biology)

Professor Tim Dafforn will be well-known to many readers of The Biochemist as a biophysical spectroscopist at the University of Birmingham. He was an active member of the Biochemical Society Council and briefly chaired the Society’s policy committee. Early in 2015, however, Tim took a step back from his formal roles within the Biochemical Society as part of a requirement to take up an exciting new challenge as the Chief Scientific Adviser at the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. He now combines this initial three-year appointment on a three-day week basis, with his academic work at the University.

The Royal Society of Biology (RSB) is a strong advocate of the chief scientific adviser network across government departments. If we want a government, in all its forms, to give science and the scientific method priority we need experts at the heart of government. We were therefore delighted to welcome Professor Dafforn back to Charles Darwin House to deliver a lecture on academic entrepreneurship to the December RSB member organisations’ meeting: a regular format for updating the membership on the work of the RSB and to provide the opportunity to hear about key issues across the bioscience sector.

Tim used his own experience of commercialising academic research through spin out companies to highlight the critical importance of academic entrepreneurship and the challenges that every academic will face along the route to realising the production of new products and services. The first challenge was time. Most academics have a wide range of calls on their time and there are pressures from universities to focus on what many will see as the “normal day job”. Publishing excellent research and delivering high quality teaching will always be critical, so persuading universities to invest time and support in facilitating entrepreneurial activity can often be a challenge when the returns are not quick or easy to see.

In Tim’s case it is taken around 25 years to start to see the true commercial value of his original ideas and, even more problematically, the real value has arisen in applications which were simply not seen at the outset, with the original concepts falling by the wayside. He argues that we need a different and more complex model for science funding within universities. Providing academics with dedicated time out to pursue the exploitation of research has to be part of that mix alongside sowing the seed of the critical value of entrepreneurship which needs to be built in the teaching framework for all students. Whether it is a two-day dedicated module or a longer and more diverse approach to developing entrepreneurial skills doesn’t matter. The critical issue is making clear that entrepreneurship has a role in academic and other careers and that it should be valued as much as more traditional skills.

Of course, entrepreneurship is not a linear model. It can stop and start, move glacially or leap forward. This comes back to the issue of time and the way in which risk is viewed by all the people involved, as the team and business grow. Tim was clear that the senior, often founding, academic need not always lead the business. It frequently makes sense to hand over to someone early in their career, where the risk of moving into a new start-up is not seen as such a high-risk, and where they can often be a driver of innovation ensuring the business grows and evolves.

In answer to questions from the floor around the inevitable discussion of investment options and managing the expectation of investors, Tim highlighted the role that government can play in providing advice, facilitating networks are making sure the policy environment rewarded and supported entrepreneurship for the academic community. As the new Chief Scientific Adviser at BIS, and a previous entrepreneur in residence there, Tim Dafforn is well placed to help government find pragmatic solutions that will make a difference. We wish him well with those endeavours and the learned society sector through its diverse membership, across academia and industry, should ensure the importance of academic entrepreneurship remains high on the agenda working with BIS and other government departments, providing advice wherever possible.