Excellence by design

George Rice, University of Nottingham, UK

Dr George Rice MInstKT runs the Technology Demonstrator at the University of Nottingham. Here he celebrates a new national project with designs on commercial success

"Design is not simply aesthetics; it's the rigorous process that links new technologies to business – creating things that work properly." James Dyson, Ingenious Britain (March 2010)

Inventive Brits like James Dyson, Kenneth Grange and Jonathan Ive know that 'design' links creativity and innovation – it can shape ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Many successful companies have well-integrated design departments that continuously translate new research developments into new products.

Outside these larger organisations, a significant design industry exists to support customers in all aspects of design from product design, graphic design, branding and communications, retail design, service design and many more. The innovative capabilities of these design agencies, combined with some 'design thinking,' can have a significant impact on technology transfer within universities.

Now, thanks to new funding from the Intellectual Property Office, the Design Council and the University of Nottingham will build on the strengths of their collaborative pilot project, 'Innovate for Universities' (IfU) to develop a national programme that will help universities use design to commercialise technology and other intellectual property.

Design to improve university commercialisation ventures. The 'Innovate for Universities' (IfU) 2009/10 pilot project was led by the Design Council with funding from BIS and HEFCE and design project funding from the universities involved: Aberdeen, Cambridge, Nottingham, Leeds, York, and UCL.

IfU tested the premise that design could be used to enhance commercialisation of university intellectual property. The pilot gave TTOs access to a Design Council 'Design Associate' (an independent design mentor) who worked to identify where design could support the commercialisation of IP.

The project's findings were eye-opening. Across 30 projects, 80 per cent of participants reported reduced risk; 50 per cent increased the value of IP; 30 per cent accelerated to market; and 100 per cent developed new approaches to commercialisation.

The pilot resulted in the formation of new spin-out companies and licence deals. Participants reported that design increases speed to market, reduces risk, and helps maximise IP value.

The Nottingham Perspective. The University of Nottingham, through its unique Technology Demonstrator activity, has continued to explore the use of design since the IfU pilot with a large number of projects benefiting from many design inputs, often using local design agencies.

Nottingham's Technology Demonstrator, part of the University's Technology Transfer Office, has working prototypes of some of the university's latest inventions, all of which are available for commercial development. Packed with attractive, interactive exhibits, it's the place for visitors to see how research findings can be transformed into commercially successful products.

We use the facility as a space that appeals to a wide variety of audiences, from well-informed potential research funders or business partners and potential collaborators, to schoolchildren who might be inspired to follow a path into research and development. The Technology Demonstrator contributed ideas to, and benefited from, developments that have emerged in the course of the IfU pilot.

Funding for the future. The IPO's top grant of £100,000 will fund a 12-month programme to embed understanding of the value of design into knowledge transfer and commercialisation operations in universities across the country.

The grant was won following a joint bid by the Design Council and The University of Nottingham to The Intellectual Property Office's 'Fast Forward Competition' in March 2011. This aimed to encourage and support the very best of innovative knowledge transfer practice as part of its 'IP in Research and Knowledge Transfer' programme.

Looking ahead, development of this national programme will encompass three main elements:

- a Design Toolkit for technology transfer professionals, enabling them to identify design opportunities, prepare design briefs, and effectively procure design services to help achieve commercialisation goals;
- design 'master-classes' to offer an intensive one-day course for technology transfer professionals on the benefits of using design to commercialise their IP – and how to work with designers;
- a nationwide programme of events.

Main project partner the Design Council is a UK voice for a broad spectrum of design, architecture and public space, at the heart of social and economic renewal. It demonstrates how design can help build a stronger economy and improve everyday life through practical projects with industry and public services.

To register your KT Office's interest in taking part in the next IfU scheme, please contact Jesse Belgrave, Head of Business and Science Programs, at the Design Council, at Jesse.Belgrave@designcouncil.org.uk.