

Innovate UK: bringing innovative ideas to market

Innovate UK is the UK's innovation agency, and its goal is to help grow the UK economy by inspiring and supporting pioneering UK businesses to create the industries of the future. The agency facilitates the creation of new products, processes, services and industries, by providing the know-how to take innovative ideas from concept to reality.

The UK does science well, that is in no doubt. With the exception of America, the UK has more Nobel Laureates than any other country. And, although home to just 0.9% of the planet's population, the quality of the nation's scientific institutions is ranked second in the world.

So the UK is definitely doing something right. But how can it make the most of these assets?

SUPPORTING INNOVATION

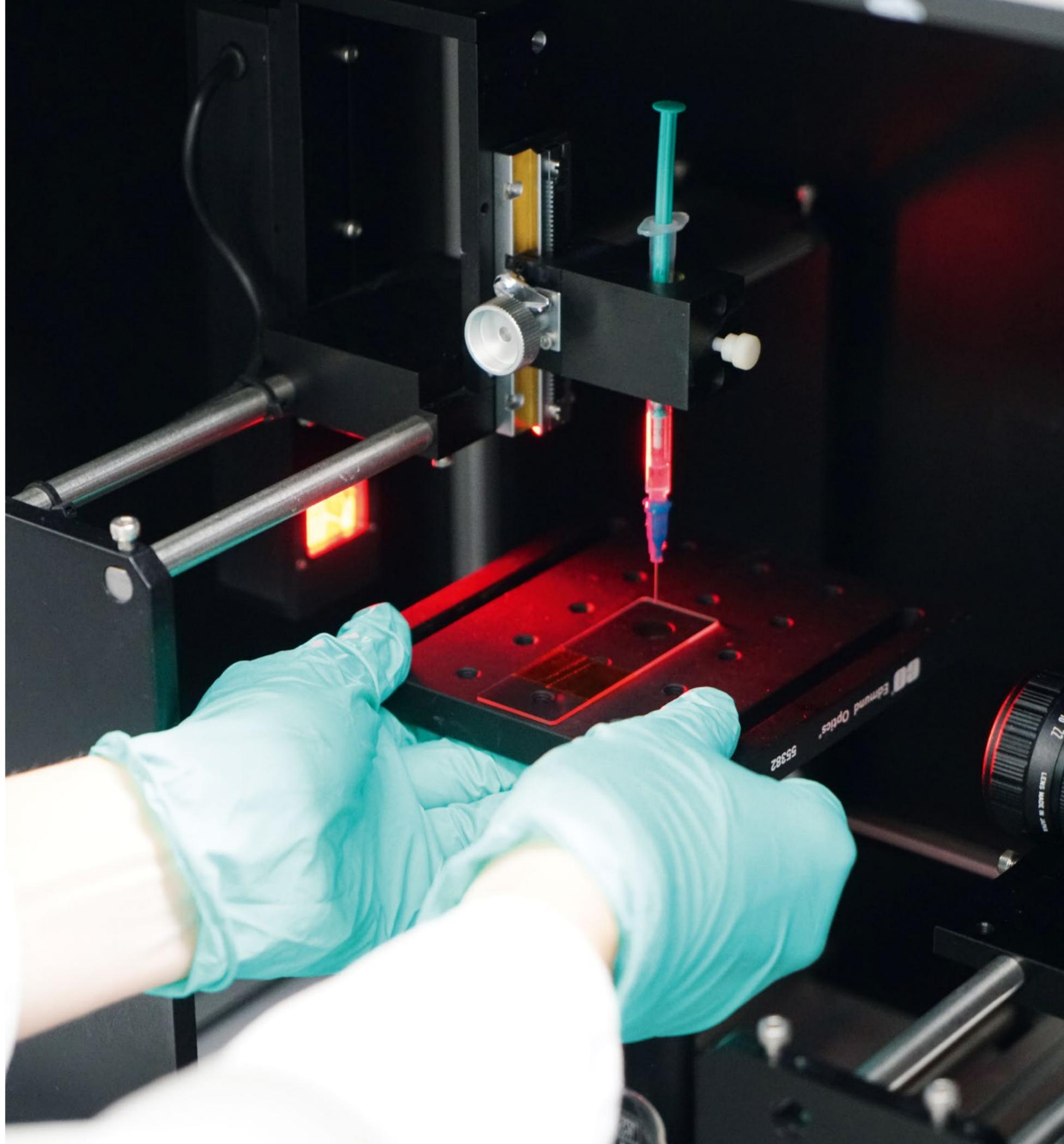
Innovate UK was founded by the British government in 2007 (as the Technology Strategy Board) to address this question. Described as the UK's innovation agency, this non-departmental public body aims to close the gap between innovative research and its commercial exploitation. Based in Swindon, the agency funds, supports and connects innovative businesses with the aim of accelerating sustainable economic growth. It provides funding for projects in four sectors: health and life sciences, infrastructure systems, emerging and enabling technology, and manufacturing and materials. To date 7,600 organisations have been supported, resulting in 55,000 new jobs and over £11.5 billion added to the economy.

In her latest blog, Innovate UK's CEO, Dr Ruth McKernan summed this up as bringing new ideas and new products 'out of the lab and into the marketplace'.

To stimulate the 'out of the lab and into the marketplace' process, Innovate UK has many mechanisms at its disposal. These include Collaborative Research & Development funding and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, which help to connect businesses seeking new knowledge and skills that could bring about a significant and positive change in their way of working. And there's the very dynamic sounding 'catapult centres'. With specialisms in everything from offshore renewable energy and transport systems, to cell therapy and satellites, these organisations serve as research and development facilities, spanning the gap between early stage research and market opportunities. An example is the Cell and Gene Therapy Catapult. From its base at Guy's Hospital in central London, the centre is facilitating the growth of the cell and gene therapy industry by helping organisations across the world translate early stage research into commercially viable and investable therapies.

Innovate UK also runs a range of funding competitions, which are open to all UK

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SPECIFIC recently opened a new research facility to start manufacture of demonstration models of their 'buildings as power stations'

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companies with an innovative idea. Start-up companies are encouraged to partner with larger companies, and everyone has to bid for money: the best ideas receive funding.

REACTING TO CHANGE

One of this year's competition winners spotted an emerging gap in the post-Brexit agricultural sector. The University of Lincoln, together with Capacity Building Support Ltd and Berry Garden Growers Ltd, entered their plans for autonomous robots to support fruit picking. At present, the UK soft fruit sector employs approximately 35,000 fruit pickers each day. The roles are low skilled and the sector has a high reliance on EU migrants to fill these posts. When the UK leaves the European Union, the availability of this labour force will be greatly reduced and fruit growers will struggle to harvest their crops. Autonomous robots offer a potential solution.

ENCOURAGING COLLABORATION

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Wales' SPECIFIC Innovation and Knowledge Centre, is something that Innovate UK is particularly keen to encourage. Based at Port Talbot, SPECIFIC is developing buildings that can generate, store and release their own energy, in one system, using just the sun's energy. While the centre's research teams are working on the next generation of solar technologies, the building-integration team is already testing out SPECIFIC'S vision for 'buildings as power stations', by building full-scale demonstration models, using existing technologies. At the same time, the centre's commercial engagement teams are bringing together professionals from industry and government to develop the commercial viability of these new technologies, and to discuss and stimulate change in the construction sector.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

Ensuring that this wealth of new ideas, products and services can expand beyond the archipelago of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is another key aspect of Innovate UK's work.



"The UK is a limited market for many businesses", notes the agency's CEO, Dr Ruth McKernan, in her latest blog.

"UK companies must look up and out, exploring international opportunities to ensure they scale. Innovate UK may be a UK innovation agency but we have an ever-growing focus on the many, many business opportunities available internationally for UK businesses.

"After all, innovation knows no boundaries – whether they are geographic, disciplinary, organisational or societal".



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