Creative Leaders in Industry

The most common barrier to the establishment of new collaborations is the limited ability to support early interactions and knowledge exchange between industry and academic researchers. The Medical Research Council (MRC) launched the devolved institutional Proximity to Discovery: Industry Engagement Fund in 2015 to enable the use of creative approaches to building relationships with industry partners. Funding will enable research organisations to be proactive in developing opportunities for collaboration and allow a greater flexibility to respond quickly to opportunities when they arise.

This fund aligns with MRC’s devolved Confidence in Concept (translational viability) fund to further enable research organisations to establish academic industry relationships. Short term people exchanges between industry and academia are seen as a key way of exchanging skills and knowledge and developing a longer term working relationship. Funding can be applied for at the very earliest stage of a collaboration and does not necessarily need to be aligned to a specific project objective.

From discussions with industry contacts the key hurdle to industry personnel joining academia has been highlighted as a lack of clarity on what they might do when they are there, having moved from a pressurised and highly project-managed environment into a more open arena. This is despite a growing desire for more effective engagement with academia, especially aimed at developing current and future leaders that are more connected with laboratory environments.

To address this, we are implementing the structured Creative Leaders in Industry programme for industry placements – mirroring similar programmes run by large pharmaceutical companies for academics joining their teams on fixed-term secondments – maximising the benefit of the placement for both parties. This programme is aimed at the rediscovery of creativity and innovation that will re-release the ‘heart of a scientist’, supporting more effective scientific and strategic leadership, with projects spanning the development pipeline from discovery through to clinical implementation, while the supervisory teams are integrated across academia and clinical settings to provide a truly translational environment.

The scheme is flexible but will aim to provide a 6-12 month training programme for industry staff (particularly those highlighted as potential future scientific leaders) to spend time in our interdisciplinary translational research environment. This may be by undertaking 2-3 short tailored projects with academic leaders alongside a series of seminars and workshops designed to inspire new ways of working based on academic innovation. Fellowship funding may support up to £10,000 per year for accommodation and travel, as well as up to £6,000 to support laboratory-based activity. In order to retain clarity over employment, we do intend to cover salary costs.

We expect each industry partner putting candidates forward to have worked with our local Business Engagement Partners (BEPs) before this stage to ensure that the right individuals are selected, and that there are robust arrangements for mobility and other considerations such as IP already in place. The scheme relies on industry partners selecting their best candidates in terms of current / future leaders to put forward for Fellowships, which are flexible and can be tailored on a bespoke basis. The review process will include a brief, but formal application from the candidates (developed with help from our BEPs) outlining their reasons for wishing to undertake the Fellowship, their intended structure for working (including duration and mobility arrangements in terms of travel and accommodation) and details of the projects they will be engaged on. There will be a formal interview stage before appointment, overseen by the MRC CiC / PtD Steering Group.