



Forming industry partnerships: where to start?

College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (CMVM) researchers generate a wealth of in-depth knowledge that can help companies drive innovation. In this guide, Lisa Backwell, Research Impact Assistant for CMVM, shares insights into setting up productive industry collaborations from meeting two colleagues: Dr. Andrew McBride and Professor Marc Vendrell, who have both directly engaged with these processes via the University of Edinburgh's commercialisation service - **Edinburgh Innovations (EI)**. Edinburgh Innovations (EI) provides support for collaborations between companies and researchers at the University of Edinburgh. They have dedicated **Business Development teams** that can assist researchers, staff and students transform their innovative ideas into successful projects and businesses.

Why engage with industry?

It is hard to ignore the most obvious benefit of engaging with industry...money! Commercialisation involves development of research into something of market value.

Simply put, companies often have resources and finances that can broaden the scope and scale of your research, in turn both accelerating opportunities and increasing impact potential.

“In technology development, the dream is to make something that many people can use, working with industry can give you the possibility to transfer tools and knowledge to a lot more people”
– Prof Marc Vendrell

However, there can be many other benefits such as:

- Developing original ideas: collaborations can expand your own and your team's skillset and knowledge
- Sector expertise and real-world experience
- Increasing the visibility and credibility of your research
- Attracting new students and post-docs to the lab

Forming a collaboration is a time commitment, it requires a lot of work, but “it is an investment in your future” says Marc.

Different routes into industry engagement

There are many ways to engage with industry. This can be through:

- Collaborations - Researchers work together with an organisation to obtain new knowledge that can be applied
- Contract Research – Researcher is paid by an external organisation to work on a project and deliver research outputs.
- Licensing – Researchers transform their outputs into something organisations can use or sell.
- Consultancy – Researcher is paid by an external organisation to provide expertise. This can involve analysis and testing but does not create new knowledge.
- Start Up – Researchers create a company based on their research outputs, skills and expertise.

How do industry collaborations come about?

Researchers might want to take a direct approach or an organic approach to building new collaborations. The direct approach involves actively seeking a company for a collaboration whereas the organic approach evolves and develops over time.

The direct approach

Marc secured his first collaboration through a directed approach with EI. Marc and his team conducted laboratory research and found a reagent with potential commercial value. He then selected companies to reach out to and organised a number of meetings until Millipore Sigma become interested and bought one of his reagents.

If you have an idea, discovery or technology that might have a practical application, you can pursue an industry collaboration in many ways, such as:

1. Producing a top level document for partnering meetings

Many conferences and events facilitate one-on-one partnering meetings to encourage interactions between participating organisations and delegates. The interactions here are not serendipitous. These meetings are often short and scheduled in advance, so it is important to be efficient. EI can help you produce a one-page brief that you can present at partnering meetings.

2. Seeking out suitable companies and contacting

You can research potential partners and narrow down your list based on their research interests and motivations, location, funding opportunities and resources.¹ It can be good to “check if they already interact with academics” Andrew advises. Finding who to approach can be challenging as “it’s not only reaching out to a company, it’s reaching out to the right person in the company and at the right time,” Marc recalls. [The business development & industry engagement teams](#) at EI can help identify potential partners. Once you have filtered your options, you can start to initiate conversations, but keep this light and be careful not to disclose confidential information that could prevent a future patent through unintended disclosure of a novel concept, technology or innovation. If in doubt on how much information is too much information, EI can give advice. Your research institute/centre Business Development Executive (BDE) is a good first point of contact. If initial contact with industry provides a warm lead, further in-depth discussions can be arranged under a confidentiality/non-disclosure agreement (CDA/NDA). Negotiated, on your behalf by EI, this will ensure that discussion of novel details of your research remains confidential in a way that safeguards your right to protect and exploit your research.

¹ Use [PitchBook](#) to seek out potential industry partners – PitchBook is an up-to-date financial database on companies and deals they have done. You can use filters such as geographical area, and research topics to help narrow down your search.

3. Responding to specific funding calls

Applying for relevant grants and competitions can be a great way to build credibility and spark a collaboration. For example, [Boehringer Ingelheim](#) regularly propose short-term commitment funding calls to support clinical research proposals. Many grants and competitions are available but they often have specific aims and objectives such as improving access to diagnostics or accelerating the development of therapies. [The Scottish Enterprise](#) have a funding database where you can search for funding to develop practices, create new products, services and technologies across the UK and worldwide.

The organic approach

In Andrew's experience, most of the time, collaborations are rarely planned for. They occur organically, and often stem from an informal conversation, where both parties become interested in each other's work and realise that further conversations and potential collaborations could be mutually beneficial. This was the case for Marc after collaborating with Millipore Sigma, where he developed a number of partnerships from meetings at conferences. "It became a bit like a snowball, once you start building credentials in the field, it becomes easier and easier to get approached."

While these are seemingly spontaneous, you can increase your odds of engaging with industry productively by:

1. Raising your profile through social media

Following potential partners via LinkedIn and Twitter can help foster relationships. Companies often gather publications that are relevant to their business interests to seek out who might be working on a project they could collaborate on. Disseminating your work via social media, while being careful not to disclose confidential data, concepts or know-how, can help with making these publications more visible.

2. Reaching out before a conference/meeting

After registering for a conference, you often receive a list of delegates. If you would like to engage with one of the attendees, send an email before attending to check if they would be available for a short conversation. Marc has found "meeting people and having conversations are often the best way to recruit someone willing to champion your work"

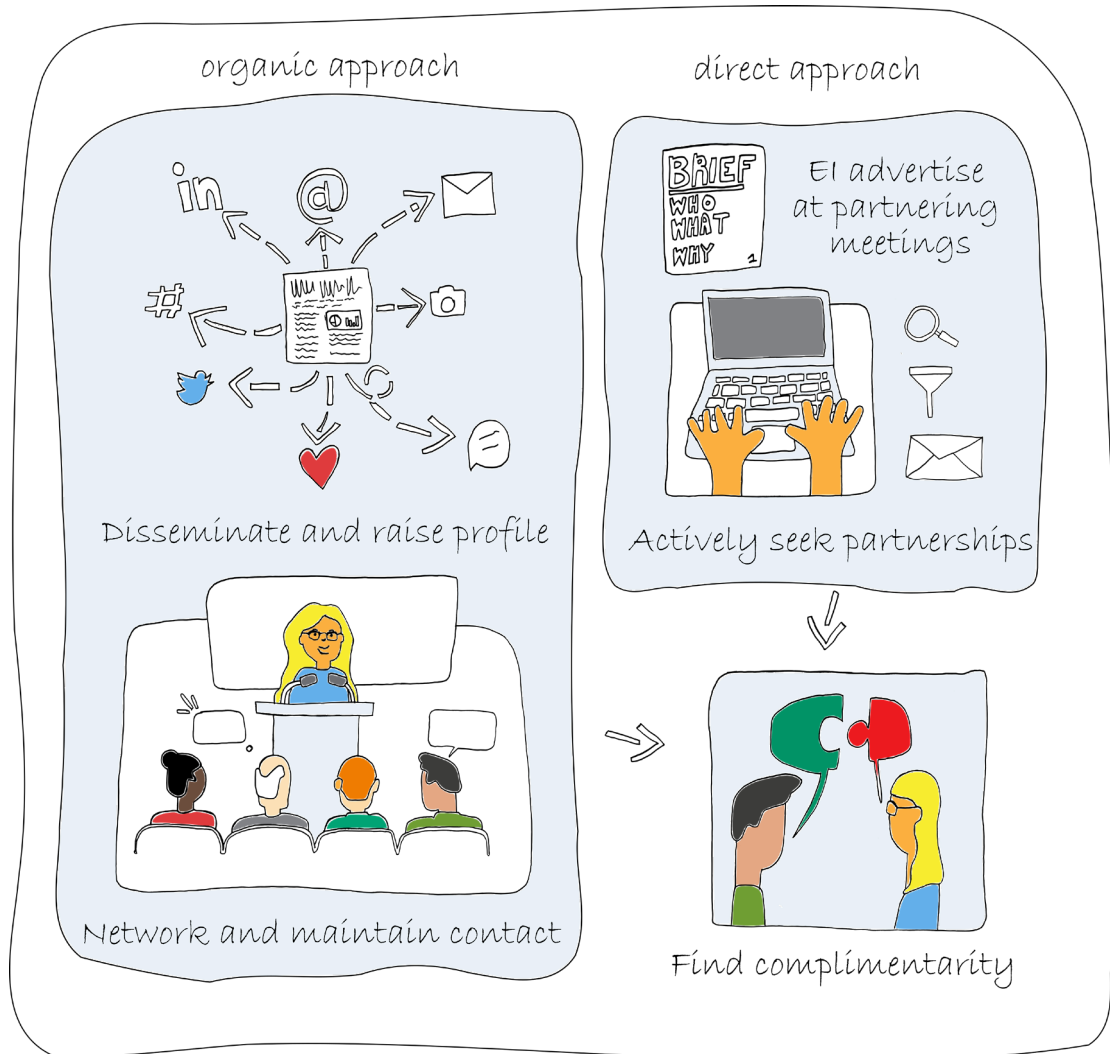
3. Follow-up and check-in

Finally, if you have had a productive conversation with someone, follow-up on it.

"Even if the conversation does not suit a collaboration initially, it can be good to circle back and check-in with them, this can lead to doors opening in the future"

– Dr Andrew McBride

Inviting a potential partner to give a talk or attend an activity, like asking them to judge a poster competition, is also a great way to keep the conversation open.



Initiating industry collaboration approaches by Lisa Backwell

Top tips for industry engagement

Access the right support

Marc talked about the support he had received from the University of Edinburgh to help with his collaborations. Once he had a promising reagent with preliminary data, he reached out to EI using the [invention disclosure form](#). EI can:

- Deal with the technical aspects of technology transfer
- Suggest licencing opportunities
- Understand and negotiate intellectual property
- Determine the most effective commercialisation strategy

Reaching out to EI as early as possible can give you access to opportunities sooner.

Start with casual conversations with collaborators

Once you are in the room with a potential partner, it is important to form a two-directional conversation.

“It can be quite some work to foster relationships and nurture them, they are not as transactional as people may think”

– Professor Marc Vendrell

Rather than diving into the technical details, take time to listen to the company’s motivations from the beginning, and find the complementarities with yours. “Often we separate academia and industry” says Marc, however industry partners tend to be scientists. Remember, an academic’s motivation and way of understanding can be closer to a group in a company than with the neighbouring lab group in their own institute.

For further support, EI offer an excellent online course (Engage) comprising seven unique modules that provides practical tools and guidance on building partnerships and forming translational collaborations.

[EI Engage](#)

In particular, EI Engage offers a dedicated module focussed on the “how to” of external engagement, which covers:

- Approach a potential collaborator to discuss opportunities
- Follow strategies to understand collaborator’s needs
- Identify and frame a collaboration opportunity

[EI Engage Module – How do I engage with external organisations?](#)

Protect your technology: A balancing *impact*

If you might want to patent a research output, you have to make sure it is not in the public domain before filing the patent application. This can be conflicting for academics who are creating academic knowledge that they want to disseminate into the community as early as possible, especially if there are competing groups working on similar ideas.

However, patents filed too early may lack key data required for convincing stakeholders that the technology is worth protecting, which means if you want to patent, you sometimes have to do so at the expense of your academic publications.

Marc describes this as “Two clocks ticking at different speeds”, i.e. the faster academic turnaround versus the slower patenting process. Unfortunately, the “patent is always winning” as patents cannot be processed if the work has been published already.

You have to choose the right moment, which professionals at EI can help with.

Join and share networks!

Join communities that engage with industry partners.

Since academic research is highly specialised, reaching out to your own network of contacts can often direct you to the most suitable partners. In addition, Andrew has found that many academics are unaware that their internal collaborators might already have connections with industry partners of interest. In fact, there is a vast untapped network of industry connections within the University. So, where appropriate, ask your colleagues for advice and recommendations.

You can also join communities and groups that bring together academics, professional service staff and industry partners. For example, the Usher Innovation Community, which facilitates collaborations across public, private and third sectors to develop new co-produced data-driven solutions for health and social care challenges.

[The Usher Innovation Community](#)

Further information

1. Learn more about the **Edinburgh Innovation's commercialisation** process, which outlines the different routes for commercialising a technology.
2. Edinburgh Innovations provide a guide on Funding Your Startup, which covers:
 - Different types of funding
 - Funding available in Scotland
 - How to find an investor
 - Expectations from investors

[EI Funding Your Startup guide](#)



Dr Andrew McBride is a translational research enthusiast with a background in drug development. He currently works as the Research Projects Manager for CMVM and Entrepreneur in Residence with the [Wellcome Institutional Translation Partnership Award \(iTPA\) team](#) at Edinburgh Innovations. In these roles, he develops a suite of translational and commercialisation projects and activities by helping researchers make use of translational funding opportunities. Over the years, he has witnessed first-hand what encourages a successful industrial partnership from forming.



Professor Marc Vendrell leads an [interdisciplinary research group](#) here at CMVM. The lab have developed peptides that act as fluorescent probes capable of tracking a wide range of diseases, including how tumours respond to drugs. With a number of these peptides being patented and taken up by commercial companies, his group are leading the way for translational chemistry in Edinburgh.