Interview: Killian O’Driscoll – Projects Director, National Institute of Bioprocessing Research & Training (NIBRT), Ireland



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NIBRT's projects director discusses the new 'Biologic' center for biologics research, business development, training, and commercializing the organisation's extensive research capabilities.

As Projects Director, you are responsible for driving NIBRT’s growth and development, in terms of both research and bioprocessing training. What’s the most exciting opportunity that NIBRT is currently working on?

We are very excited to be participating in a collaborative proposal to launch a new Science Foundation Ireland Research Center focused on investigating technologies related to the development and manufacture of biologic medicines. The proposed center would be called ‘Biologic’, and we have been notified that it has made it successfully through the initial round of the application process and have been invited to submit a more extensive proposal. Around 20 companies have indicated that they are willing to contribute financially to the project and participate in the development of the proposal, which is a signal that this proposed center would likely have a strong impact in terms of pharmaceutical research and manufacturing – which is of course a key criterion for Science Foundation Ireland who assess funding proposals based on their excellence and impact.

In terms of business development, where do you see the most potential for NIBRT to further engage with pharmaceutical companies at the international level?

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NIBRT's relationships with the pharma industry generally fall within two categories: training and research.

The training side is certainly more mature in terms of industry engagement, and despite not actively marketing our services in this area we have reached a situation where approximately 25 percent of our trainees are coming from abroad. We have observed a significant need for skilled workers in the biopharma sector globally, and it is a challenging area to train people in because you need access to a pilot plant facility like we have here at NIBRT, which constitutes a significant capital investment. As such, we certainly see an opportunity for NIBRT to help the industry meet this need for skills at the international level.

As a more proactive approach to meeting this global need for bioprocessing skills, we are currently launching an online international MSc in biopharmaceutical sciences. The first cohort of students are beginning their studies online this month, and they will later visit our facility here for practical courses related to the individual modules they choose to study. Thus far the response rate has been positive, and we are now actively marketing this program to drive enrolment.

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On the other side, how are you working to drive the expansion of NIBRT's research activities?

The first step for developing NIBRT's role as a research entity in the large molecule R&D space is to recruit more Principle Investigators of international renown, and to then work with them to develop relationships with industry and funding agencies. We are delighted that Prof. Michael Butler has recently joined us as chief scientific officer, joining our three current principle investigators Prof. Pauline Rudd, Dr. Jonathan Bones, and Dr. Colin Clarke. Prof. Butler formerly taught at the University of Manitoba and has extensive experience around mammalian cell systems. He will also be serving as Biologic's first director should our proposal be successful, and this is certainly one of the larger initiatives in terms of NIBRT's strategy for building our R&D activity.

While Prof. Butler joining NIBRT marks a significant step in our institution's development, our goal will be to attract a few more high caliber principle investigators, particularly in the area of downstream processing where we see a definite bottleneck in biologics manufacturing processes,

and also on the engineering side in terms of process development and scale-up.

NIBRT also offers commercial research services – what sort of growth are you seeing in this area?

In terms of commercial research services, we have a group that provides various bioanalytical capabilities. Historically, a lot of this work has been around glycan analytics; however, this group is growing rapidly at present in terms of both the types of analytical services we provide and the number of clients we are working with – certainly we aim to further advance this trend.

We have provided these sorts of services under different models, including standard contract research agreements, as well as within the context of collaborative research projects. For collaborative research projects, we effectively employ and host the post-docs carrying out research projects that our collaborators have a significant interest in, and thus fund alongside whatever academic research grants the teams are able to attract.

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