

Scotland's wealth of innovation in the spotlight as university start-ups line up for challenge trophies

Converge winner puts environment at heart of waste

BY FIONA LAING

Some of the most innovative ideas in Scotland just now are being driven by environmental concerns. This was clearly evident at the Converge Awards in October where the projects being celebrated included circular economy and energy transition-inspired solutions to the world's problems.

The 2023 winner of the prestigious Converge Challenge impressed the judges with her determination to find a scalable solution to help feed the world while safeguarding the planet.

Dr Georgina Robinson, founder of N-ovatio-N, lifted the Challenge crown for her bid to tackle the growing problem of organic waste in the aquaculture industry. The company is providing a circular economy solution to upcycle aquaculture waste into high-value feed ingredients in the form of marine worms which are rich in protein, lipid and omega-3 fatty acids.

Robinson, who is a UK Research & Innovation Future Leaders Fellow, is commercialising her research through a spin-out from the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS), a partner of the University of the Highlands & Islands.

The SAMS post-doctoral assistant in tropical ecology explains that the technology can be co-located at aquaculture production facilities to deliver circular benefits such as reducing waste disposal costs and impacts, and create low-carbon alternate feed ingredients.

The Converge Challenge trophy, which recognises novel business ideas with solid IP foundations, high commercial potential and scalability, comes with £50,000 in cash

and £20,000 for in-kind business support to drive the winner forward in its next phase of development.

Although the prizes will be valuable in the future, entering Converge has given Robinson money-can't-buy benefits in the training that leads up to the final.

"We are a very small company at a very early stage. The Converge business training was really fantastic. The in-person training in June was the best thing ever: I came back with such clarity on what the next steps were and what our beachhead market was."

Since the publicity about her Converge win, Robinson's LinkedIn has "gone crazy". She adds: "The visibility is amazing, but I would say for me it was all about the high quality training."

Another pressing challenge in the modern world is improving health and wellbeing and that was represented by the business of the Converge Challenge runner-up.

BrigID Biologics is working to save the lives of the most vulnerable by treating serious and life-threatening fungal infections.

Led by Dr Soumya Palliyil, who is head of the Scottish Biologics Facility at Aberdeen University, BrigID Biologics is developing next generation antibody-based drugs with the assistance of an innovative drug discovery platform that identifies specific fungal targets. This information is vital in developing effective and first-in-class drugs.

If it is university-grown businesses like these that the Converge programme has been fostering since it was launched in 2011.

Dr Claudia Cavalluzzo, executive director at Converge, said: "These founders represent the magic that

Scotland needs to realise its ambitions and fulfil its potential as one of the world's greatest nations of innovators."

The full list of winners at the 2023 Converge awards illustrates the breadth of talent in Scotland and neatly dovetails into the national innovation strategy.

"The next step for Converge and all our colleagues working in Scotland's wider innovation ecosystem is to translate the programmes for action laid out in the entrepreneurial campus blueprint and the national innovation strategy and take these from policy into practice," says Cavalluzzo.

The Scottish Government's ten-year national innovation strategy aims to place Scotland among the world's most innovative small nations - countries such as Denmark, Finland and Norway. The strategy highlights the importance of the innovation ecosystem and the collaboration between businesses, the public sector and universities.

"We selected our cohort of 100 start-ups and spin-outs from a record 247 applicants back in May, just as the national innovation strategy was being unveiled," says Cavalluzzo. "That alignment between the strategy's objectives and the innovative ideas developed by our students, graduates and researchers demonstrates the importance of Scotland's universities and research institutes when it comes to fulfilling our nation's ambitious goals."

The strategy outlined four innovation themes in which Scotland has a competitive advantage, spanning energy transition, health and life sciences, data and digital technologies, and advanced manufacturing.

Six of this year's Converge finalists were developing solutions as part of the energy transition, while nine were working across data and digital technologies and another nine were focused on health and life sciences. The advanced manufacturing and food and drink fields were both represented by two finalists.



Dr Georgina Robinson's award-winning business upcycles aquaculture waste into high-value feed ingredients in the form of marine worms
Lloyd Smith

and ambition demonstrated by the talented pioneers we've recognised at this year's awards."

Since its launch in 2011, the Converge programme has trained more than 700 aspiring founders and contributed to the creation of more than 330 companies which have raised in excess of £320 million in follow-on funding.

Those selected for the programme

receive business training and those in the advanced categories receive professional pitch coaching to help articulate their business ideas with confidence. Then there are masterclasses, pitching competitions and the preparation of business plans before the finalists are selected.

Part of the Converge programme sees the Challenge finalists - which are typically the most advanced

of those taking part - showcasing their businesses to investors in London in order to secure investment to grow their businesses.

Open to students, graduates and staff from across Scotland's universities, Converge supports new businesses through intensive business training, networking, one-to-one support, equity free cash prizes and expert, profes-

al advice from its industry partners. Funded by the Scottish Funding Council, South of Scotland Enterprise, Creative Scotland and 11 corporate partners, Converge works in partnership with all of Scotland's universities. ●

Entries for Converge 2024 will open at the end of January.
www.convergechallenge.com

2023 Converge winners



BrigID Biologics founders Carol Munro and Soumya Palliyil with innovation minister Richard Lochhead and Claudia Cavalluzzo

In total, there were 16 prizes across the four different categories with a total prize fund of £320,000.

Converge Challenge: Georgina Robinson, founder, N-ovatio-N. A spin-out from Scottish Association for Marine Science, N-ovatio-N is tackling organic waste in the aquaculture industry.
Runner-up: BrigID Biologics, Soumya Palliyil, Aberdeen.

KickStart Challenge: Ricardo Moreno Ballesteros, a PhD student at Dundee University for GenProteX, a future company developing a technology to speed the long and costly drug discovery process.
Runners-up: Kamila Malysz, Excello Labs, Edinburgh, and Ryan Anderson, AllSteady, Dundee

Create Change prize: Fantasy Fibre Mill, a Heriot-Watt University project founded by Rosie Britton and Nick Evans that connects regenerative agriculture to ethical fashion by producing natural fibre yarn which is grown, processed and spun in the UK.
Runners-up: Lasse Rasmussen, Two

Raccoons, Aberdeen, and Joseph French, Whimsylabs, Edinburgh.

Net Zero prize: Dr Oleg Ishkov from Heriot-Watt University with future spin-out, Rockit. The company's technology prevents leaks of greenhouse gases from geology drill sites in the North Sea escaping into the atmosphere.
Runner-up: Darius Roman, ya!Lab, Heriot-Watt.

The other winners were:
● KickStart Creativity Award: Alisha Kasim, Books2Life, Robert Gordon.
● KickStart Entrepreneurial Spirit: Rory Bone, 4SB Mobility, GSofA/Glasgow.
● RBS Female Entrepreneurship Award: Laura Ripley, Northern Frights, Open University in Scotland.
● Cisco Future Tech Award: Nanik Ramchandani, LastingAsset, Edinburgh Napier.
● IBioC Award: Jessica Birt, Concinnity Genetics, Edinburgh.
● GENIS Award: Matteo Cese, CEXAL, Edinburgh.