

£50 million data innovation hub for manufacturers to accelerate digital tech

- £50 million data innovation hub at Ulster University to support UK manufacturers to accelerate development of digital technologies
- dedicated grant funding will be provided to manufacturers to implement expert recommendations from data scientists
- adoption of digital technologies such as Industrial Internet of Things and artificial intelligence is key to driving manufacturing productivity, sustainability and competitiveness

UK manufacturers are to have their productivity and competitiveness boosted thanks to a new data innovation hub and testbed led by Ulster University, Industry Minister Lee Rowley announced today (Wednesday 18 May).

The £50 million Smart Manufacturing Data Hub (SMDH) will support small and medium size manufacturers to capture and better utilise their data, helping them increase productivity, growth and sustainability. Businesses in sectors spanning from food and drink, aerospace and many more will be supported to develop, test and adopt the latest data-driven technologies.

Nearly 10,000 manufacturers are expected to benefit from the hub and 13,000 jobs will be supported, helping to boost economic growth and level-up regions across the UK. The hub will be supported by £20 million from the UK government backed Made Smarter Innovation Programme, along with £30 million of business co-investment.

UK Industry Minister Lee Rowley said:

As we embrace the digital manufacturing revolution, it is vital manufacturers across the UK can capitalise on the productivity and growth gains that come with the adopting the latest data-led digital technologies.

The Smart Manufacturing Data Hub, backed by £20 million of government funds, will support companies to implement cutting edge production and process techniques themselves, helping bring the next generation of products to our shelves in a more efficient and sustainable way.

The hub will host an online Manufacturing Data Exchange Platform that will enable companies to submit their manufacturing data and receive recommendations in return, helping to improve their products and processes. A dedicated £5 million fund will then provide companies with grants to make further improvements in areas of critical importance to their business.

Virtual manufacturing testbeds will allow companies to create a 'digital twin' to simulate the implementation of digital technology on their own processes, harnessing data from other manufacturers that have already adopted the technologies to encourage investment.

The SMDH will also provide manufacturers with expert analysis of their emissions and energy data from support staff specialising in data analytics and engineering, which will help them target reductions in waste, energy use and ultimately improve sustainability.

Pro Vice Chancellor Research at Ulster University Professor Liam Maguire said:

Made Smarter provides the opportunity for innovative collaboration that will be transformative in driving industry competitiveness. At Ulster University, we have a strong track record of collaboration; using our research and technology to act as a catalyst for change, innovation and positive economic, social and environmental impact. Made Smarter is another important project in the broader realisation of the Derry and Strabane City Deal agenda, further enhancing the attractiveness of investment and driving economic growth.

The SMDH will first be accessible by small and medium size manufacturers in Northern Ireland in the coming months, before going live for companies across the rest of the UK. The programme will be supported across the rest of the UK by 12 delivery partners, including the University of Cambridge Institute for Manufacturing, Industry Wales and Scottish Engineering.

The funding comes as part of the £300 million Made Smarter Innovation Challenge, a collaboration between UK government and industry designed to support the development and increased use of new and existing industrial digital technologies, including artificial intelligence and virtual reality.

The challenge aims to deliver a resilient, flexible, more productive and environmentally sustainable UK manufacturing sector. It will also develop new technologies that can be exploited commercially across the manufacturing industry, worldwide.

Today's announcement builds on the government's Help to Grow schemes, which are helping smaller businesses to boost their productivity with training and software that is proven to get results.