David McConnell

David McConnell obtained an undergraduate degree and gold medal in genetics at Trinity (1966) and a PhD in biochemistry at the California Institute of Technology (1971). He was appointed Junior Lecturer in the Department of Genetics (1970), comprising at that time of just three staff, three postgraduate researchers and one Senior Sophister. His teaching and research in molecular genetics began a transformation of the Department at a time when the science of genetics was about to be revolutised by genetic engineering and bioinformatics.

His research focused on the control of gene expression in phage and bacteria. In 1976-77 he was awarded an Eleanor Roosevelt Fellowship by the IUAC to learn to sequence DNA in the laboratory of Walter Gilbert at Harvard Unversity. His work opened up the development of molecular genetics, DNA sequencing and genetic engineering in Trinity and in Ireland. He participated in the early stages of the Yeast Genome Project encouraging colleagues to work on the yeast, human, bacterial and plant genome projects.

Apart from his own direct research interests he keenly supported studies in medical, bacterial, yeast and plant genetics, genetic anthropology and several other fields with other members of the Genetics Department. His early interest in DNA sequences led to a natural collaboration with Paul Sharp on statistical analysis of the data that were extended by Sharp and his colleagues into the area of molecular evolution.

He carried out research with colleagues in Biochemistry, Microbiology and Botany, and joined Dan Bradley of Physics and John Kelly of Chemistry in developing novel photochemical and photophysical methods for analysing DNA. He chaired the college committee that proposed the formation of Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience and he promoted teaching and then research in neurogenetics at the Smurfit Institute. In the 1980s he engaged in university-industry collaborations with Guinness (Barbara Cantwell and Noel Murphy) and with Novo Nordisk (Borge Diderichsen). He advised the IDA on attracting leading biotechnology companies to Ireland. For more than ten years David worked with UNIDO promoting biotechnology in the developing world, especially in China, and chaired an expert group which advised UNIDO on where to locate the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (now in Trieste and New Delhi).

David advised Provost Watts on establishing the Smurfit Chair of Medical Genetics and worked with Provost Mitchell in planning and funding the Smurfit Institute of Genetics. The Institute has acquired an international reputation in many fields and is now home to more than 150 postgraduate staff and 60 sophister students. A dedicated teacher at all levels, David has always had a strong belief in research-led teaching, challenging his students to become critical and independent scholars. Many, including members of his research group, have risen to senior academic positions, worldwide.

He was appointed to the first Irish Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (1997) and was a co-author of the Technology Foresight Report that led to the formation of Science Foundation Ireland (2000). He was appointed by the Danish Government as a member of the European Research Council Expert Group (1999-2003) which presented an influential report making the case for the establishment of the ERC (2007). Later he was a member of and chaired grant panels of the ERC. He was the second Irish person to be appointed as a member of the European Molecular Biology Organisation (1976). He is a member of the Royal Irish Academy, and was a member of council and Vice-President. He was made Fellow of the Zooogical Society of Ireland and an Honorary Life Member of the RDS. He was elected Fellow (1978), and became a Senior Fellow and Chair of the Fellows.

David McConnell has been devoted to Trinity College defending the qualities, especially the value of academic leadership, which he believes make it a great university. He was Vice-Provost, Vice-Provost for the Quatercenteary, Registrar, and Head of the School of Genetics and Microbiology. As Vice Provost he created the mechanism by which the Irish School of Ecumenics became an institute in Trinity. He ran for the Provostship in 1990 and 2000.

He was Chairman of The Irish Times Trust, Member of the Board of the Irish Times, President of Zoological Society of Ireland (Dublin Zoo and Fota Wildlife Park) and Chairman of the Adelaide Hospital. He is President of the College Historical Society and Honorary President of the Humanist Association of Ireland.