

TECHNOLOGY

NSRI TO 'LEAPFROG' INTO NEW TECHNOLOGY

The newly devised activity programme at the National Subsea Research Institute is aiming to 'leapfrog the next generation' of technology with a big focus on operational issues away from development-based ideas.

NSRI was founded three years ago by four universities - Aberdeen, Dundee and Newcastle and Robert Gordon - with the assistance of Subsea UK. The current aim is to put together a multi-million pound fund to support the newly defined activity by the end of the year.

NSRI ceo David Pridden told SEN that following his appointment earlier this year he instituted a '100-day' plan to determine target areas of offshore technology where 'there nothing was being done'.

Pridden admitted that trying to convince big operators to shift ongoing research from other countries to the UK would have been a pointless exercise.

The other part of the strategy was to develop technology that was relevant to the UK sector, ie a mature sector. This is why the emphasis will be on the 'opex' side of the balance sheet with a focus on integrity and safety. Pridden said that this was obvious in 'the post-*Macondo* era'.

The areas where attention will be targeted - innovative inspection, underwater robotics

and autonomous learning, underwater communications and intelligent monitoring systems - are deliberately vague in order to allow for a wide-ranging approach.

A number of the expected projects will seek to employ basic scientific ideas and existing technologies from other industrial sectors and apply them to subsea. Quantum mechanics, self-learning robotics and fibre optics have all been mentioned as possible areas of investigation.

While operating companies and big contractors will be the obvious targets for new sources of funding for the research programme, Pridden made an overt attack on current and previous UK governments for their total lack of support for research in offshore technology.

'The UK clearly lags behind the rest of the world in terms of oil and gas R&D spend,' Pridden said. 'Since the 1980'es, the UK industry has had...minimal support from government, who, unlike in Norway, have provided no incentive for companies to invest in research in the UK.'

Pridden pointed out that in a period of national economic malaise, the subsea sector is one of the few booming areas with 40% growth in the last three years. Manufacturing accounts for more than a third of the £5.9bn output.