



Distinguished Senior Innovator Programme

Scientia potentia est. Knowledge is power. But how can knowledge generated at universities have a greater impact on the world? This is why we innovate: to bring the power of research to societal challenges.

01 A Stronger Culture of Innovation

Big challenges need novel approaches that can be put into practice; this is innovation. Universities are experts in developing ground-breaking ideas of diverse types—not only through technology and natural science research, but also through social analysis and aesthetic creation. How can universities advance real-world societal transformation and well-being? Enter the DSI programme.

The Distinguished Senior Innovator (DSI) Programme at Aarhus University aims to strengthen a cohesive, university-wide approach to research-based innovation that integrates internal and external collaboration. Recognising the diversity of practices, pathways, and engagement strategies across faculties and disciplines, we seek to foster an ecosystem in which AU can combine its strengths with those of industry partners, investors, and local stakeholders.

While Aarhus University has established a robust foundation for innovation, tighter coherence is needed to unlock our full potential. To achieve this, appointed DSI researchers will, alongside their individual innovation projects, strengthen internal collaboration by connecting research groups across disciplines, fostering external partnerships, and encouraging co-creation and knowledge transfer. By addressing these areas, we aim to create a more cohesive innovation ecosystem that leverages Aarhus University's strengths and expands its reach beyond the university. This will enable us to tackle complex challenges, accelerate knowledge transfer, and drive sustainable growth for our university, industry partners, and society.

What Is Innovation at AU?

Innovation means “something new” and refers to developing, introducing, and adopting new ideas, practices, technologies, or methods that result in significant improvements or advances benefiting society. Put simply, society benefits when excellent research is translated into practice.

As DSIs, we aim to enhance AU's ability to generate impact in Denmark and globally through the university's knowledge, creativity, and active engagement. At AU, innovation is supported by stronger bridges within and beyond the university. The DSI initiative promotes collaboration across departments and faculties, and among stakeholders such as students, researchers, industry partners, NGOs, investors, and public-sector organisations. DSIs will build a more robust innovation culture by creating, strengthening, and highlighting interdisciplinary approaches that connect academia and wider society. Our role as ambassadors includes initiatives that guide researchers, advocate for wider institutional changes, promote best practices, and foster excellence in innovation.

Why the DSI Programme?

The DSI programme addresses six pressing challenges for research-based innovation:

- **There is a significant untapped potential** at universities that could be activated to address large societal problems, including but not limited to those linked to health, sustainability, security, and digitisation.
- **Society and companies have limited exposure to and knowledge of** the benefits of, and models for, collaboration with universities and researchers.
- **Innovation and entrepreneurial activities are not a normalised** part of research projects, and thus researchers have limited training and awareness of how to pursue such work.
- **Researchers are not sufficiently recognised** for the time and effort they devote to innovation.
- **University structures designed to foster disciplinary research** can pose barriers to boundary-breaking projects and cross-field training.
- **There are relatively few examples of projects** that demonstrate the breadth of ways that researchers can engage in innovation and entrepreneurial activities.

What Do We Do?

As DSIs, we build solutions that overcome barriers to research-based innovation and inspire further ground-breaking collaborations. Our activities make innovation pathways more visible and strengthen the ability of research to generate impact. The programme we have jointly developed is designed to foster creativity, the development of new ideas, and innovation citizenship – all at a structural level.

When it comes to research-based innovation, our work focuses on:

- Making It Known
- Making It Accessible
- Making the Necessary Structures
- Making It Visible
- Making It Sustainable

02 Making It Known

We increase awareness of and passion for innovation across AU by leading by example and serving as role models and catalysts for an innovation culture. We do this through:

- **Inspiring** students, colleagues, and AU's community by providing examples of innovation and career pathways through our own DSI projects.
- **Providing** colleagues and university leaders with opportunities for discussion, advice, and expertise on innovation.
- **Mentoring** Junior Innovators and working with Kitchen, Aarhus University to build the Junior Innovator programme.
- **Translating** between the needs of different faculties and the university-wide innovation agenda.
- **Increasing** attention to innovation within relevant forums and structures at AU (boards, committees, clusters, open science, and innovation processes).
- **Tracking** and **highlighting** the contributions of the DSI programme within AU.

03 Making It Accessible

We work to make it more feasible for researchers in all disciplines and career stages to engage in innovation work, by:

- **Fostering** a broad definition of innovation that encompasses the work of diverse researchers and facilitating ongoing reflection on the different kinds of innovation that AU might foster.
- **Encouraging** “bottom-up” innovation cultures that grow out of researcher perspectives and highlighting opportunities within AU to innovate through discussions with peers, in networks, through open science, and in clusters.
- **Spreading** awareness of Kitchen, Aarhus University among researchers and students.
- **Advocating** for and **showcasing** ways for researchers to engage in innovation while maintaining their university affiliation.
- **Increasing** awareness of funding resources.

04 Making the Necessary Structures

We need formal and informal structures within the university that support researchers' engagement in innovation. We need to:

- **Contribute** to existing and foster additional initiatives that support interdisciplinary collaboration to strengthen innovation potential.
- **Grow** the Junior Innovator programme and develop further junior-level innovation opportunities.
- **Advise** on, **design**, and **establish** diverse innovation programmes, including PhD courses, postdoctoral initiatives, entrepreneurship education at assistant-professor level, teaching dialogues, and BA- and MA-oriented activities.
- **Pursue** new funding for novel innovation programming.

05 Making It Count

We advocate for merit systems that recognise innovation contributions so that researchers who take on the challenges of innovation have strong opportunities for career progression.

This work includes:

- **Advocating for greater recognition** of research-based innovation in academic careers.
- **Advocating for greater inclusion** of innovation alongside research and teaching in hiring and promotion contexts.
- **Working to define equitable ways** of recognising innovation merits across diverse disciplines.

06 Making It Visible

We work to make AU's innovation capacity clearer for external partners and the wider public.

This involves:

- **Actively participating** in events that include external partners and the wider public (giving talks, hosting workshops, attending panels).
- **Disseminating** our own innovation activities via multiple channels.
- **Working** with Kitchen, Aarhus University to communicate to diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, industry representatives, investors, and funding bodies.
- **Contributing** to a webpage showcasing DSI activities and success stories.

07 Making It Sustainable

We ensure that structures, including the DSI programme, become embedded in university practices and have lasting effects.

We do this by:

- **Linking** our initiatives to those of others at AU by coordinating and collaborating with the AU Research Support Office, the AU Technology Transfer Office, faculties, departments, and centres to maximise impact and benefits over the short and long term.
- **Developing** the content of the DSI programme and providing feedback on it, taking an active role in evaluation and documenting lessons learned from DSI initiatives.
- **Communicating** colleagues' needs to Kitchen, Aarhus University to support the further development of innovation programmes.

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