In 1985, supported by an Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council grant, a team of gifted aerospace researchers from the University of Surrey formed a company to commercialise their activities. The company, Surrey Satellite Technology Limited, is now a world leader in its field, and has launched over 30 space missions.

The team’s achievements can only be described as cosmic. Even before launching Surrey Satellite Technology Ltd (SSTL), with the university’s support they had already sent into orbit two small satellites they’d largely designed and built themselves – hitching a ride on the back of NASA space missions.

If designing and building the satellites wasn’t enough, the team had also proved they could do so using commercially available electronics and parts – and at a fraction of the time and cost it would have taken their superpower counterparts in the USA and the Soviet Union.

1985
The year of the company’s launch – supported by funding from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

34
The number of satellites the company has launched to date.

A NEW APPROACH TO ENGINEERING
Twenty-five years on from SSTL’s launch, the man who led the research team, Professor Martin Sweeting, is now executive chairman of the company, and was knighted in 2006. Sir Martin says: “As a PhD student in 1985 I was not afraid to take risks – I believed that the costs associated with space could be cut dramatically by taking a new approach to engineering.

“There’s no question that space travel makes for a very bumpy ride. But we tested every component of the satellites in a specially-designed chamber that replicated the space environment. Everything still worked afterwards. In fact, we still test all our satellite equipment in the same way.”

Despite the Challenger disaster of 1986, seriously damaging the world’s appetite for space exploration, within 10 years SSTL had launched eight satellites for various governments and businesses.

Soaring reputation
The company’s size and reputation continue to soar. Today SSTL is the world’s leading small satellite company, operating high performance satellites and ground systems for a fraction of the price normally associated with space missions. The company is committed to changing the economics of space.

Now employing around 300 staff, SSTL has launched 34 satellites, and its missions continue to provide critical services to customers across the globe – ranging from Earth observation to science and communications.

SSTL remains closely linked to the University of Surrey, which owned the company until 2008, when it was acquired by EADS Astrium NV for over £40 million – the largest-ever sale of a university spin-out company.

Sir Martin Sweeting continues to direct the university’s space centre, and remains a staunch believer in the importance of government investment in private sector research and development. He says: “The government has a role to play to provide funding. Not large quantities, but the sort of seedcorn funding that catalyses new business, or new technical solutions which then allow new business models to really take root.”

Key facts:
→ £150 million: The value of its export sales – and counting
→ 300: The number of staff on its books
→ £40 million: The amount the company was sold for in 2008 – the largest-ever sale of a university spin-out company.

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UK SATELLITE COMPANY A COSMIC SUCCESS