



The research commercialisation office of the University of Oxford, previously called **Isis Innovation**, has been renamed **Oxford University Innovation**

All documents and other materials will be updated accordingly. In the meantime the remaining content of this Isis Innovation document is still valid.

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Entrepreneurial Oxford

Jamie Condliffe reports on a quite remarkable sea change at Oxford, towards entrepreneurship as an adjunct of learning

With such a concentration of bright minds, Oxford fizzles with inspiration and ideas. But now the University is helping to bring together like minds, from undergraduates to alumni, to turn ambitious academic thinking into world-changing business. Welcome to entrepreneurial Oxford.

The University's main focus always has been – and always will be – learning, but there is an increasing desire to apply it, too. “The University is primarily focused on teaching and research,” explains Stuart Wilkinson, from the University's Knowledge Exchange team. “But people outside these walls – government, industry, alumni – are increasingly focused on the impact it can have. And a large part of that is down to entrepreneurship.”

Oxford already has a fine track record in turning academic work into commercial success, of course. Most recently Natural Motion – an animation technology company for the video game and movie industries, established in 2001 out of the Department of Zoology – was purchased by social network gaming company Zynga. By simulating the biomechanics and motor control nervous systems of real animals and human beings, Natural Motion creates animation with unprecedented realism, which has been used in everything from the best-selling game *Grand Theft Auto* to Hollywood films *Troy* and *Poseidon*. Perhaps no surprise, then, that it sold for a cool \$527 million back in January of this year.

While Natural Motion succeeded because of great ideas and talented staff, it was also given an important helping hand by Oxford's Isis Innovation. Established in 1988 to help Oxford researchers commercialise their work, the University-owned company recently noticed that the road to commercial success has changed over the last few years. “We realised that there were start-ups

based on ideas coming out of undergraduate and postgraduate work, not just established research labs,” explains Tom Hockaday, Managing Director of Isis Innovation. “Those guys just don't fit the same model as academics.” Hockaday is referring to the bright young things you might see inhabiting the hip startups of Silicon Valley rather than research labs among the dreaming spires: twenty-somethings for whom intellect, enthusiasm and determination are a surrogate for a lifetime in research. They need a different kind of help.

Isis Innovation's solution is the Software Incubator: a physical space and support network allowing teams to develop nascent software ideas into real products. “We give them space to call their own, provide professional services like commercial mentoring and Intellectual Property advice, and generally lend a hand,” explains Hockaday. Open to all University members, the incubator is used by alumni as regularly as undergraduates. “So far, 27 projects have come in and 11 have turned into successful companies,” explains Hockaday.

Unsurprisingly, Isis draws most of its talent from the sciences, but not everyone arrives with a fully formed team. “We often try and introduce people, to build teams, to try and make them as effective as possible,” explains Hockaday.

Elsewhere in the University, more diverse groups are gathering without such explicit guidance, and represent something of a sea change. “When I arrived in Oxford four years ago, the business school had two centres for entrepreneurship: the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and the Saïd Business School's Entrepreneurship Centre,” explains Pamela Hartigan, director of the Skoll Centre. “I immediately thought that was dumb: why have two, when there shouldn't be any dichotomy? Every entrepreneur should have social, environmental and financial concerns in mind.”

Acting on Hartigan's idea, the two centres, while not merging, have collaborated to form the Oxford

Launchpad, which opened in February 2014. “The idea was to create a shared space, where students, faculty and alumni could come together to ideate,” explains Hartigan.

Stepping through its doors at the front of the Saïd Business School, it feels as if someone took a small slice of one of Google's international offices and placed it in Oxford. Formerly used as a reception room

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within the School, the space has been transformed by a team from the Skoll Centre and the Entrepreneurship Centre at the Business School, including Becky Fishman and Zelga Anderson. Now, a blackboard, dense with new ideas scribbled in haste, fills an entire wall of the otherwise bright and light modern space; eager hands tap at laptop keys, their owners perched on the edge of Eames chairs lining a long central table; others kick back to think with a coffee as they lounge in brightly coloured sofas.

The Launchpad is open 7am until 11pm, seven days a week, and the space often has to turn people away. “One month we had 300 people wanting to use it,” explains Hartigan. “It’s just not big enough!” Indeed, the initiative already has approaching 1,000 registered users, a figure that’s rapidly growing – helped along by the fact that, unlike the Isis Software Incubator, the Launchpad is open to anyone, alumni or otherwise. While some within the space prioritise financial concerns, others social or environmental, the new centre provides a melting pot in which people from any background can work on business ideas. Hartigan believes that cross-pollination is the key to its success. “The magic really happens when we bring a diverse set of students together,” says Hartigan. “The problems of the world aren’t going to be solved by MBAs alone.”

That’s a refreshing message: if every business could have within its business plan a whole spectrum of performance indicators, and not just a profit target, then the world would change for the better. Certainly, there’s a remarkable range of business ideas already taking shape within the walls of the Launchpad, all of which take into account the triple bottom line: financial, social, environmental. They include game-based learning technologies for the developing world by iGBL to an ethical ticket sales platform called Tigmus that ensures that artists secure their fair share of an event’s taking. And this is all being carried out by people from a wide range of disciplines: in a recent case study competition at the Launchpad, where teams worked to prepare and pitch proposals for social entrepreneurial ventures, 72 students from 26 different Oxford departments took part. “We had people from the Departments of International Development and Public Health, the Blavatnik School of Government – even the English and Law Faculties,” explains Hartigan.

That cross-pollination isn’t limited to people, though. The Business School and Skoll Centre are now teaming up with Oxford’s Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division to create a new Entrepreneurship Portal: an online hub, inspired by the one used by TechCity in London, to share updates and resources within the entrepreneurial community across the University and Oxfordshire more widely. “The portal aims to amplify events, resources and anything that can generally add value to the lives of entrepreneurs across Oxford,” explains Soushiant Zanganehpour, who’s leading the project. The site should be running by the end of Michaelmas Term 2014.

All this may sound like the University is catering for those already certain that entrepreneurship is for them, but it’s helping the less experienced, too. Just up Banbury Road at the Careers Service is The Shed: the



The Said Business School provides a bespoke workspace for entrepreneurial thinking

University’s approachable face of entrepreneurial training. Less a glamorous start-up space and more a series of workshops and events, its purpose is to introduce students to the concept of entrepreneurship and let them work out if it’s for them. “I was helping several groups of students who had come to the

Careers Service to talk about entrepreneurial ideas,” explains Jonathan Black, Director of the Careers Service, who also has experience in entrepreneurship and currently chairs an Isis Innovation university spin-out company. “I asked them why they weren’t going to other University initiatives, and most of them said that they were a little... intimidating.”

The result is more of an educational programme than the other initiatives within the University. “We didn’t want to actually develop startups, just provide students with skills they’d find useful in the future,” explains Black. So The Shed runs innovation workshops, where students learn startup basics, and business plan challenges, where they see how an idea goes from concept to full-fledged business proposal. Perhaps the main draw at The Shed, though, is the Startup Immersion: a 48-hour taste of life as an entrepreneur, where students form teams, develop ideas, interview potential clients, build business models and pitch ideas to a panel of enterprise experts.

Furnished with such experiences, it’s no surprise that Oxford’s students are now taking on researchers and alumni. Wolfson Innovate, for instance: a social entrepreneurship competition open to college members, with a prize of £5,000 and advice from professional mentors, is just one of a handful of Oxford-based contests designed to pit Oxford entrepreneurs of all ages against each other. The winners of this year’s inaugural event were a team of DPhil students from the Institute of Biomedical Engineering, going by the name of Sentimoto, which is developing wearable devices to monitor the health of the elderly. Their smartwatch measures physiological attributes of the wearer as well as information about their surroundings to determine their wellbeing, feeding back information so that they can take action or share their data with family or carers.

Clearly, those bright young things that Hockaday noticed are showing established academics and alumni a thing or two – so it’s only a matter of time before initiatives like the Oxford Launchpad and Wolfson Innovate, which bring them together, spur the next Natural Motion. “We are at the very beginning of a wave of interest in entrepreneurship,” muses Hartigan. “And I think the overall message is that you need an excellent team around you to succeed. If you can’t find that at Oxford, where can you?” ☺


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