

Don't wait until you graduate: helping students kick-start their own businesses

Are entrepreneurs born or made? It's a question often asked as the world moves on from the idea of the super-rich, hero entrepreneur to a broader concept of the entrepreneurial spirit.

“Nowadays we find students, even those who don't come from family business backgrounds, who are naturally innovative and connected. They are very ambitious” says Veejay Mistry, a senior careers adviser at Regent's University London. “They realise that at least 98% of companies are small or medium-sized. Students today prefer to work collaboratively and search for support – almost equipping themselves to be entrepreneurs. Universities can help to encourage this entrepreneurial spirit through real-life projects and networks. They can also favour innovation and the sharing of ideas across disciplines,” adds Mistry, who works in The Hive, the university's specialist careers and business centre. It's designed to provide students with the support and space they need to create their businesses.

The Hive is a student-led consultancy that goes out into the business community to find projects that need doing, putting employers in touch with students and alumni¹ who can provide what they need. “I was working with a student studying media who was looking for a production internship,” says Mistry. “Our student-led consultancy group were looking for someone with this skillset via The Hive, which is a great space to match talent with live projects. Pairing them up was a success for both parties: the student was offered an internship and the project went on its way.”

With 12 staff and three full-time advisers, it offers careers and startup advice and 12 work spaces for entrepreneurs. Matthias Feist, employability and student enterprise manager, says The Hive was established to provide a collaborative space to build a community of innovative entrepreneurs pursuing their individual dreams together. “Students seeking careers guidance receive it in a real working environment, preparing them for the workplaces they will encounter. Alumni and students who work on their own businesses build a community of entrepreneurs that help each other. Students get to work with clients and develop entrepreneurial skills. And students and graduates seeking internships are surrounded by those who can offer them.”

Meryem El hayani is one of The Hive's first regular visitors. While studying for a master's degree in management, she realised there was an opportunity to sell culinary Argan oil, traditionally and sustainably produced and consumed in a small region of south-west Morocco. “The oil is 100% pure with a unique, nutty flavour, and its health benefits have been widely reported” says El hayani, founder of Hayani Ltd. She never considered becoming an entrepreneur until she came to Regent's, and it was the university that inspired her to start her own business. El hayani had been working for a marketing company for nearly two years when she decided to go back to university. “There was nothing wrong with the job – it was a good experience and not without challenges, but I felt I could be doing so much more,” she says. “But I lacked confidence and I don't think I could have achieved what I have without the support of the tutors and the team at The Hive.”

Thanks to The Hive, alumnus François van den Abeele, who has a BA in international business, was able to create an enterprise that is not just successful but also sustainable.

A few years ago, he started reading about the millions of tonnes of plastic dumped in the ocean every year – and his company Sea2See was born. It reclaims thousands of tonnes of fishermen's plastic nets and rope² from the ocean and turns them into fashionable sunglasses made in Italy. With orders flooding in from around the world, he has expanded into regular glasses as well. Each pair uses about 10kg of ocean plastic, collected in containers around the ports and sorted by hand.

“The advice I would give to today's students is to do something that makes sense, to get involved in something that makes an impact,” says van den Abeele. “In the optical world, an industry worth billions of dollars, there's no sustainability built in. Many people want to do something, but they don't know what. Wearing glasses made of trash is pretty cool. It raises awareness about the way plastics are polluting ocean life.”

By Liz Lightfoot, adapted from *The Guardian*, June 12th, 2019

¹ alumni: people who have graduated from a school or university

² a rope: *une corde*