

Oxford's tech scene booms as investment doubles in just one year

Despite the economic hit of the pandemic, VC investment into Oxford's thriving tech scene has almost doubled in the last year, with insights from Tech Nation showing \$1.173B invested this year alone versus \$504.7M in 2020.

The ecosystem is built primarily around AI, deeptech and medtech, with notable ventures including the Jenner Institute's Vaccitech, which hopes to create a universal flu vaccine. Clearly, Oxford is becoming increasingly key to the UK's rapidly growing startup economy.

Science and innovation in the city

The University of Oxford ranked top in the Times Higher Education University world rankings for 2020 and has long been considered a hub for business and innovation. The institution provides wide-ranging support for its students, alumni and researchers, including a range of initiatives designed to encourage people to take their first step into entrepreneurship. The ecosystem is relatively new – the University-run accelerator The Oxford Foundry was only founded in 2017 – but it is growing quickly.

This success is in part due to Oxford Sciences Innovation (OSI), which

harnesses the work of researchers and creating spinouts. OSI currently has a portfolio of over 100 companies with a total value of over \$2B, including companies such as Xerion Healthcare, a nanotechnology company aiming to improve radiotherapy, and Oxford Quantum Circuits, a company working on quantum computing technology. The work of the centre, however, has not been without criticism – a recent report in *The Financial Times* suggested that spinouts suffer from aggressive equity demands and difficulty in attracting support in the wider investment world.

For Omar Lingmann, current undergraduate student and founder of [Myscroll](#), an app for university life, the initiatives set up by the university were central to his decision to pursue entrepreneurship alongside his degree. His team made it to the final of [All-Innovate](#), a university-wide pitch competition offering a top prize of £10,000, and were recipients of the Jesus College Anthony Fletcher Fund.

“Before the All-Innovate competition, my company was nothing more than a loosely held idea,” said Lingmann. “The competition gave us the impetus to push things further. It forced us to sit down and properly turn an idea into an MVP.

“Oxford’s greatest asset is its people. I’ve been lucky enough to be able to really leverage Oxford’s network to gain access to high-flying entrepreneurs and pick their minds to help me skip some steps on the experience ladder.”

This is a sentiment echoed across the city’s startup ecosystem, an environment that has been fostered by the collegiate system at the university itself, and in places like the Oxford Hub outside of the institution.

The city is also home to numerous incubator and accelerator programmes, most notably the student-led [OX1 Incubator](#) and the Oxford Foundry accelerator. For Jack Chong, president at OX1 and serial entrepreneur, the incubator provides a way for talented individuals to find each other in a large student population. To Chong, those students that make their way to the incubator are those that might find success within the UK’s startup ecosystem, one that in his mind is still in its early stages in comparison to the US.

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Gaps in the ecosystem

Although Oxford's ecosystem has clearly found success in science and tech startups, this is something that both Lingmann and Chong think is ultimately disadvantageous despite the massive investment that it has driven to the city, particularly at the undergraduate level.

For Chong, there needs to be more interdisciplinary engagement across the institution. He believes that particularly in the humanities departments, students and researchers alike are discouraged from engaging with the tech world.

“There isn't a culture of hacking stuff, of building stuff, or thinking about how to use tech in general,” he said.

Lingmann, on the other hand, believes that the opportunities for interdisciplinary work and entrepreneurship are there, they're just not that obvious.

“Oxford [is] a top hub for innovation, and for those who go out and seek it, the possibilities and opportunities are endless. I would simply advocate for better access to that scene,” he said.

Another challenge that faces entrepreneurs in Oxford is the Town vs Gown divide. For Sarah Jordan, founder and CEO of *Y.O.U. underwear*, a social enterprise and underwear brand, this is one of the main barriers to entrepreneurship in the city.

“The startup scene in Oxford seems to be predominantly focused around the university and it seems that there are fewer opportunities and resources for local businesses if they aren't

affiliated to the uni,” said Jordan.

“Much of the support available targets tech or medical and biotech startups, uni spinouts or high-growth companies, so it feels that as a small social impact business we don’t fit in any of those groups and so have to find our own way much more.”

That hasn’t stopped Jordan from finding success – she was able to launch by raising £20K via a Kickstarter campaign – but she says that she felt she had to build her own networks more, often leaving the city to do so. Jordan is an Oxford Brookes alumnus and has been able to benefit from some of their support, as well as utilising resources such as OSEP, a social enterprise for social entrepreneurs, and OxLEP, which supports local enterprise in Oxfordshire.

Increasing BAME representation

There is work being done to bridge the current gaps in the ecosystem. This year, the Oxford Foundry announced their inaugural Entrepreneurial Fellowship Initiative, a scheme aiming to help BAME students secure senior leadership positions across all parts of the ecosystem.

Recent reports suggest that between 2009 and 2019, only 0.24% of venture capital in the UK went to Black founders. Partnering with ambassadors including Biz Stone, cofounder at Twitter, and Toby Coppel, partner at Mosaic Ventures, the new scheme hopes not only to expand the ecosystem in Oxford itself, but also to bring more BAME talent to the UK-wide startup economy.

While there are still clear gaps in Oxford’s offering for founders, the Entrepreneurial Fellowship Initiative might be the first step towards addressing one of the UK’s wider standing problems and makes moves to truly diversify the startup sector. Oxford continues to promise bright new talent and innovation, and it seems likely that the investment boom will only be going up from here.

To find out more about The Oxford Foundry, [click here](#).