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A Local Learning Market to Explore Innovation Platforms

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Abstract

This research investigates the design of a unique innovation platform to support entrepreneurial growth. The premise of the platform is that the needs of institutions can be coupled with supply from early-stage businesses to enable the learning and growth of those businesses. We assume that some institutions are in a position to be more helpful and understanding about the setbacks encountered by early-stage businesses, and that the institutions' skillset and tolerance offers entrepreneurs an environment to learn and grow their businesses. Many startups face competition from powerful multinational corporations that have the scale to reach consumers through inexpensive pricing, branding and reputation. The subset of startups with sustainability embedded into their ethos often has an even more difficult time competing with prices. This is especially apparent with food. Not all food is priced to accurately reflect its costs to society and the environment. For novice entrepreneurs, attempting to internalise some of these non-monetary costs may seem too great a risk. The proposed institution-based innovation platform might overcome some of these difficulties. To explore the possibilities of the platform, we combine literature review and case study analysis. While existing innovation platform cases in the literature have been studied in retrospect, we introduce a novel approach that sets out to follow the design of a food innovation platform, referred to as the Local Learning Market, from the earliest stages of planning. Our findings point to the potential risk, trust and learning advantages of this particular platform. Entrepreneurs are able to experiment and develop their value proposition in a safe space, find viable customers and identify market niches. Researching the Local Learning Market is a first step in understanding whether similarly modelled platforms can increase the likelihood of success for startups pursuing sustainable business models in other sectors.

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1. Introduction

Current manufacturing systems are unsustainable. One approach to encourage transformation towards the sustainable design and manufacturing of products is through entrepreneurial innovation, which can be cultivated by introducing the appropriate infrastructure. There are a variety of models of innovation platforms that attempt to provide such infrastructure. On one end of the spectrum, innovation platforms can be stand-alone organizations created for the primary purpose of promoting entrepreneurial innovation (e.g., incubators, accelerators). At the opposite end, they can simply be programmes that function to generate innovation. Institutions such as schools and hospitals are full of needs that can be met by entrepreneurs, or even intrapreneurs, if given the opportunity. Universities have proven fertile ground to harness the innovation of the university community through traditional incubator and accelerator models, which are primarily used to commercialize research [1]. Universities can equally capture the innovation competence of the university and local community through programmes that tender out innovation opportunities.

At the University of Cambridge's Institute for Manufacturing (IfM) there is an opportunity to create an innovation platform that matches the need for sustainable food innovation with supply from local food entrepreneurs. The platform will be referred to as the Local Learning Market. In February 2017, the University of Cambridge launched its Sustainable Food Policy in recognition of the current challenges posed by food systems [2]. To feed the world sustainably, our global and local food systems require transformation [3]. It is estimated that food systems are responsible for nearly one-third of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions [4] and cause a number of other problems such as localized pollution, resource depletion, public health issues and unjust labour practices. The current course of action calls for policy makers and incumbent corporations to remedy food system issues [5], [6]. The entrepreneurial innovation of startups offers another approach to achieve transformation of food systems. However, entrepreneurial innovation and the structures catalysing and cultivating innovation within food systems are underdiscussed in the academic literature.

This paper investigates the factors underlying innovation platforms that support early-stage food startups. The research draws on literature review of various models of innovation platforms and case study analysis of three organizations that exemplify innovation platforms for food businesses. The findings from the literature and case studies will be presented and explored with respect to the design of the proposed food innovation platform at the IfM. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the considerations and next steps in the process of creating the Local Learning Market at the IfM.

2. Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was selected in accordance with the research objectives and questions [7]. The aim of the research is to build knowledge about innovation platforms that support early-stage food startups in order to design and pilot a food-focused innovation platform. The research began with a literature review of innovation platforms (e.g. incubators, accelerators), which established the theoretical basis for the analysis of case studies [8]. A positive sampling technique was used to select cases exemplifying organizations that support entrepreneurial innovation as a means to create more sustainable food systems [9]. Using a snowballing approach, the researcher identified and studied 8 cases of sustainable food innovation platforms, 3 of which are presented in this paper. The case study data was collected through interviews (in-person and phone) and online documentation (websites of the organizations, online news articles, online consumer reviews, emails). The researcher used semi-structured interviews to understand how the organizations were started, what their objectives were and how their services benefit the local food economy [10].

The literature was examined against a series of questions to generate provisional codes [11]. The questions included:

- How is the innovation platform defined?
- What does it do?
- How does it benefit entrepreneurs?

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