



Identification of best-in-class existing information on university spinouts and gender inclusive approaches

Aim

A desk research project was conducted in order to identify existing good inclusive practice and highlight examples of information and guidance for researchers considering or pursuing an entrepreneurship path.

Scope

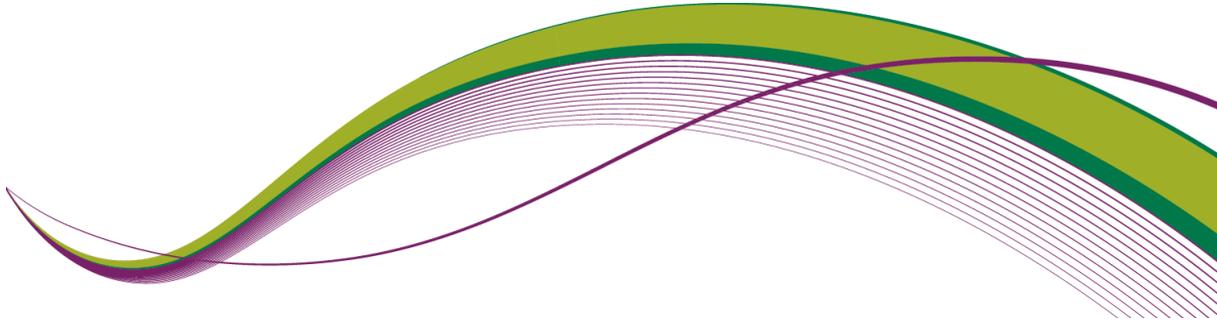
As the aim of the wider 'Women and spinouts' project is to support more women to undertake spinout (especially) or start-up paths, a specific objective of this research was to find information/guidance that is gender-inclusive and/or of particular value to women researchers who might be considering entrepreneurship. Given that the project is located in the UK intellectual property and entrepreneurship context, the information sources sought and potentially highlighted were expected principally to be drawn from information/services provided by UK HE institutions, although sources outside the UK and/or outside academia could be included if found and especially helpful.

Potential topics of interest were anticipated to include:

- Examples of female role models or case studies;
- Sources of support and guidance information;
- 'Maps' or other illustrative approaches to illustrate/explain different potential routes (such as to spinout or start-up);
- Relevant training resources;
- Material focusing on personal/career/developmental benefits of spinout;
- Gender- or diversity-focused examples of any of the above.

Search strategy and process

Practically, it seemed likely that the most substantive and relevant sources of information would be found on websites within the UK HE realm, and that information relevant to spinouts in particular might well be more prominent at institutions with higher levels of spinout or enterprise activity.





A first phase of search was therefore conducted purely of the web-based information provided by the University of Oxford, University of Cambridge and Imperial College, London.

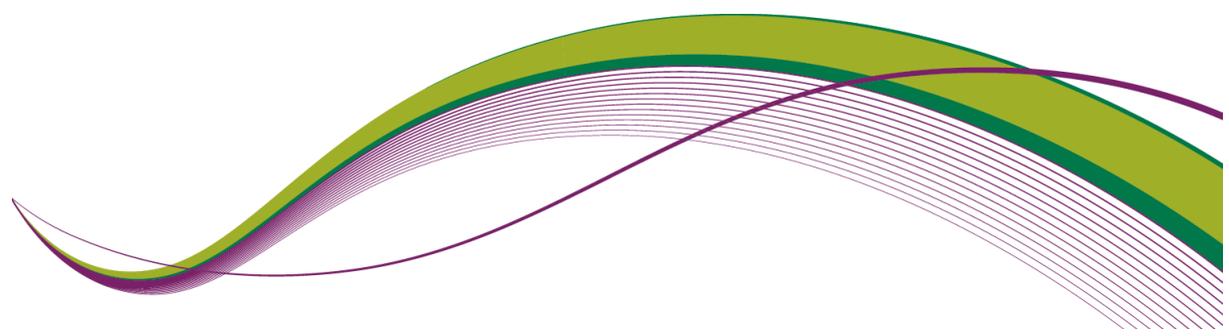
It rapidly became clear that universities' websites are by no means systematic when it comes to enterprise or innovation. The type of information sought could be available in a variety of different website contexts, so a simple search strategy was developed in order to locate it. The search terms used were: enterprise; spin-out/spinout; start-up/startup; technology transfer (office); female entrepreneurs; intellectual property. Undertaking such searches generally enabled the main locations of information to be identified, although in some cases relevant information was not all in one location within an institution's website. Other media channels (including social media) were at times pursued where linked from the respective website, but these were somewhat opportunistically pursued rather than rigorously included or searched.

The initial findings of these searches were reviewed by Vitae colleagues and the search process slightly refined (i.e. to be more discerning and exclude aspects of information not directly relevant), before its deployment in a second, much more substantive phase. This iterative process was useful to develop understanding of what was particularly 'good' information and/or of particular relevance to this project.

However, given the sheer number of UK HE institutions that could possibly contain material, this second discovery phase was also conducted purposively, starting with the 10 institutions known to have developed the most spinouts and then other research-intensive universities. The institutions searched in some detail included: University College London, Royal College of Art, and the Universities of Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol, Warwick, Leeds and Sheffield, together with Strathclyde, Swansea and Queen's University Belfast.

In a final further phase of research, deliberately targeting post-92 institutions, in order that at least brief survey of a variety of institutional environments had been undertaken, six further institutions were added which had a record of at least some spinout activity: Nottingham Trent, Plymouth, Sheffield Hallam, Oxford Brookes, Coventry and Hertfordshire. This brought the total of purposively included institutions to 20.

The presence of information of relevance found was recorded on a spreadsheet, against a series of pre-determined 'areas of interest' (which were refined as the work progressed). A separate excel worksheet was used for each institution reviewed, and particularly interesting or relevant information highlighted on those sheets, so that the 'highlights' could potentially be identified quickly.





Observations

As hinted already, the structures of universities' websites do not prioritise 'enterprise' or entrepreneurship (i.e. these terms tend never to appear on a university homepage). In contrast, 'research' (obviously) does and in many cases 'business' – but the latter tends to lead to material about building partnerships with established commercial enterprises rather than entrepreneurship. In order for anybody to find information about entrepreneurship or specifically a potential pathway, it is therefore necessary either to know where to look or to dig quite deeply to find links to words like 'enterprise' (unless serendipitously there is a relevant news item which highlights a recent spinout, or more likely that one has just been in the mainstream media).

It is concluded that HE institutions vary in the way they position information about these types of entrepreneurship (if they have it), situating it within their specific view of commercialisation of research. The research-intensive institutions strongly promote their research on their websites and do highlight collaborations with external industry or policymaking, and sometimes its commercialisation through innovation. However, most that signpost any internal resources for staff such as researchers which are intended to promote 'enterprise' or which are intended to develop an entrepreneurial mindset are not closely related to that high-profile content about research. Rather this sort of information is likely to reside nearer to their enterprise units (or spaces such as 'Enterprise Hubs') that they have created, which have not necessarily been developed with researcher entrepreneurial behaviour in mind, although these have tended to subsume what they used to call their Technology Transfer Offices.

This seems to suggest that there is scope to make information presenting and explaining processes like spinout more accessible in terms of being easier to find.

Once any relevant information is located, many of these university websites do not explicitly mention spinout as an option but may have links to describe start-up enterprises and describing knowledge partnerships or collaborations with existing organisations or industry. For those that do offer content about spinout, the process tends to come across as one which is formulaic and very contractual, driven by the university and designed to ensure that the university is protected and can benefit commercially. The focus is on the offer to the researcher as a potential entrepreneur with the university's financial backing and continued access to relevant resources and equipment, and the ability to trade on the name of the university.





Where there is information about the spinout process, it is generally well presented (suggesting that the university is keen to promote this form of commercialisation). However, much of the focus tends to be on the process itself, while more illustrative content tends to be insight into how a product developed or how the spinout company itself has been financed and developed as a commercial entity. In contrast, there tends to be little that illustrates personal motivations for entrepreneurship (other than for a company to make money or directly to leverage the idea). Rarely is there much to illustrate other personal motivations, such as an opportunity to try out a different career path or exercise leadership, or the lived journeys of those who spin out and their experiences and personal development along the way. For some women, these aspects of entrepreneurship, together with the potential societal impact of their research idea, will be as or more important than the potential commercial benefits.

While it may be hard to make information about some of the more contractual and legal aspects of a commercial entrepreneurship process open and attractive, it is perhaps surprising that there were few really clear 'maps' or diagrams of potential pathways, clarifying (for example) the differences between spinout and start-up and how individuals might consider the best pathway for them as an individual. This seems an omission, if there is a desire to increase the number who choose these pathways. Equally, there is little content identifying different aspects of support at different stages of career or commercialisation journey.

While there were some case studies of women who have spun out, they are relatively few and far between. Many of them tend to focus on the commercial aspects and the idea, rather than offering personal narratives with insight into their decision-making or subsequent career and life experiences. The best currently available are in the format of Q & A and which ask about the personal/developmental journey of the entrepreneur, not just the development of the product or the organisation. The best of these are provided by Strathclyde and Hertfordshire (interestingly, rather than large research-intensives).

Overall, this analysis suggests that there has been little attention to gender inclusivity in most of the information provided relating to spinout or other entrepreneurship, and that there will be value in providing new resources with this focus. The Women and Spinout project has developed a series of case studies, *Inspiring Women Insights*, where women founders talk about their spinout journey which can be used by other universities.

This report was prepared by Linda Hollow and Robin Mellors-Bourne at Vitae.

© 2021 Oxford Brookes University Centre for Diversity Policy Research and Practice

