Entrepreneurship meets innovation

A “spirit of innovation” has long been a hallmark of a Queen’s education. Nowadays, more than ever, that makes good sense for many reasons.

BY PRINCIPAL DANIEL WOOLF

One of the things we often hear economic and social commentators say is that the era of the “job for life,” either corporate or not-for-profit, is ending, and so today’s graduates must learn to be entrepreneurs.

Without accepting some of the more extreme prognostications on this score – surely there will be a space, for instance, for public service, long a major destination of Queen’s alumni – it’s hard to deny that innovation and entrepreneurship are and will be critically important to Canada and the world.

Successful businesses generate the taxes and the jobs that support our social safety net. Yet with a few noteworthy exceptions, when compared to the U.S., Canada historically has underperformed in the arena of entrepreneurship. Similarly, despite a wealth of inventions and discoveries pouring out of Canadian universities, the rate of translation of these into commercial, scalable products is slow, as noted in the recent Jenkins Report on research in Canada. (http://pwc.to/10TpDji)

On some of my recent international travels, I’ve been struck not just by the number of small- and medium-size enterprises that have emerged from universities and grown into successful businesses (or indeed, failed businesses; I’ll come back to that point), but rather by the spaces for young entrepreneurs that have been created in urban centres. On a recent trip to Boston, I visited several of these spaces in the company of Greg Bavington, Sc’85, Executive Director of the Queen’s Innovation Connector – a joint venture by the Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science and Queen’s School of Business.

The places we toured aren’t high-gloss corporate facilities. One, which is called “Mass Challenge,” does have a lovely view of the Charles River, but someone pointed out to us that after the first day no one who works here notices the view. The space is filled with desks and open spaces where would-be start-ups get four months to develop and spin out a product before they have to move along. Mass Challenge is a business incubator with a high turnover rate and a varied demographic. The oldest resident is 87, although (not surprisingly) most are a lot younger.

Greg and I also visited “Greentown,” a basement space in a rather grungy building in Boston that’s home to a dozen or so small groups developing products that take basic research and apply it to green technologies. This is a different approach than the one taken at Mass Challenge because in addition to desks and computers, Greentown also provides an actual shop floor and equipment to use in building and testing products.

Similar initiatives are scattered across the U.S. A common feature of all of them is that ever present is the risk of failure, which is an accepted part of the entrepreneurial experience. As the saying goes, “Reward is in direct proportion to risk.” Not every idea becomes a product; nor does every product become a success.

One of the most important bits of advice I’ve heard successful entrepreneurs offer is “Fail early, fail often.” In short, don’t be afraid to take risks; know that sometimes you’re going to fall flat on your face, so learn how and when to pull the plug on an unsuccessful venture, and then move on.

While Canadian universities and cities have some work to do when it comes to developing such models, there have been some good starts. For example, here at Queen’s and in Kingston, apart from Innovation Park and PARTEQ, the Queen’s Innovation Connector is showing great promise. The University is looking for funding to expand this program, and the 2012-13 AMS Executive team was fully supportive of efforts to provide the conditions for success in student entrepreneurship. (See p. 22 for more details.)

Queen’s is already a hothouse of ideas and new research, and each year we graduate a new cohort of bright young minds who are bubbling with the “spirit of initiative.” Our challenge is to create the conditions that fully unleash this potential and to nurture it as it migrates out into the world. Our alumni can play a big part in the process by providing mentorship, networking opportunities, and possibly even capital investment.

If such an opportunity knocks on your door, I’d urge you to please give it some serious thought, and consider ways you can contribute to the successes of Queen’s graduates and to society as a whole.
activities involving hundreds of thousands of women and men, in both rural and urban areas. Communities were talking. Violence against women was on the agenda of village council meetings. However, patriarchy is very deeply entrenched in Indian society. Female feticide and female infanticide continue despite all laws and the growing social awareness and abhorrence of these crimes.

Families do not want daughters. Widows and separated women are called “witches,” and this results in social ostracization, which often leads to them being evicted from their homes and villages, or stripped naked and paraded publicly. Many men regard a woman without a man behind her as being weak and helpless, and feel they can do anything they like with her. In such cases, a male relative or another male member of the community often starts the “witch rumour,” after being rebuffed in some way.

It’s the norm in India that men control their wives, mothers, sisters-in-law, and sisters, and don’t let them move and travel freely. If a women rebels, often she is beaten, kicked, or called names. And most men think that it is their right to have this kind of control over their wives and women in the household.

That brutal Delhi gang-rape, and the attacks on that five-year-old and on the Swiss tourist were wake-up calls for this country. The Indian government has acted positively, putting new rules and structures in place. Young people – women and men – across the country are coming together in protest, and are working to bring about change in communities. The focus is on change in attitudes toward women, and “implementation” – of existing laws, new laws, and the need to take action for justice. Violence against women is finally on the agenda of public discourse.

It will be a long struggle to bring about real change, but something new has started in India. I join in the loud and growing cry. I, too, say, “Enough!”

The writer makes her home in Udaipur, Rajasthan, India, where she is an organizer of the Asha Sansthan, an NGO that has helped to form the gender-equality group the Association of Strong Women Alone. She was the 2005 winner of the Alumni Achievement Award.

THE SITUATION IN PAKISTAN

Despite their historical and geographical ties, India and Pakistan are in many ways so very different. Yet, in others, they are strikingly similar. In no way is that truer than when it comes to the injustices of gender inequality. This is something of which Filza Naveed, Arts’14, has first-hand knowledge. To read this young Pakistani woman’s insights into the situation in her homeland, please visit the Review web site at http://queensu.ca/news/alumnireview.

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entrepreneurs

Getting down to business

A growing number of young entrepreneurs – students and alumni alike – are beating the tight job market by creating their own opportunities.

BY HOLLY TOUSIGNANT, ARTSCI'13

When Brody Hatch, Artsci'14, didn’t see the products he wanted in the marketplace, he decided to create them himself.

Brody is the founder and owner of Nude Voice Apparel, a socially conscious clothing brand that launched recently. “When you’re nude, you expose yourself. You bare who you are and what you represent, and that’s something I wanted to represent in clothing,” says Brody, who brought his younger brother Brett on board to teach him about business.

This isn’t the first company he’s created. He started a clothing brand when he was in high school, and these days the third-year film and media student runs a marketing design and event management company.

His business ventures have meant he sometimes has to forego sleep and struggles to keep up with school, but he wouldn’t have it any other way. “There’s really no other time in life when you can take such large risks, when you can try new things, in terms of starting a business,” he says. “You may fail, but this is when you’ll learn.”

Brody is one of a growing number of young innovators who are responding to the tight North American job market by creating their own business opportunities. The CBC reported on the trend in 2011, citing a statistic that three per cent of small business owners in 2007 were under the age of 30; however, this number is growing. “I see people who are graduating, don’t have jobs, and are coming back to school,” Brody says.

By launching its Initiative Campaign last fall, Queen’s is trying to make it easier for students like Brody Hatch to pursue their own ventures. A priority of the Campaign, which aims to raise a total of $500 million by 2016, is innovation and global leadership initiative. The objectives of this initiative include fostering homegrown innovators in the technology field and offering help with start-up incubation.

Brody Hatch, Artsci'14, the founder-owner of the Nude Voice Apparel clothing company, and photographer Shayna Markowitz, Artsci'14.
When I graduated with a degree in Cultural Studies last year, I remember picking up a copy of Walrus magazine and seeing a photo of a grad, gowned and capped, completely submerged underwater. It was a metaphor for feeling as though we were drowning in debt with no job prospects, and echoing Canada's Ministers of Finance and Labour, the authors of the article suggested that post-secondary institutions should guide students into the job gaps, such as those in the trades.

While he was developing the company, Derek had an advisory board at Queen's that included Queen's alumni, one of whom was business professor Ken Wong, Com'75, MBA '76.

Derek made more than lunch money when Yellow Pages bought him out, and he has maintained his entrepreneurial spirit. He's currently the Entrepreneur-in-Residence at Kinetic Café, which works with start-ups, and is developing a meeting dossier website called dossiya.com. He's also acting as a mentor to student entrepreneurs who've found him via LinkedIn.

Derek feels it's a good time for young entrepreneurs to test the waters. "The job market is not as good as it was when I started, so I'd encourage more people to try entrepreneurship. It's also a lot cheaper to start a business nowadays, he adds. "especially if what you're doing is web-based."

For that reason, Derek echoes the Nike slogan with some succinct advice for anyone who wants to launch a business: "Just do it."

"If you start young, you can afford to have a couple businesses that maybe don't turn into full-blown enterprises, they're just interest-based or lifestyle-based businesses," he says, agreeing with Brody. Hatch that "you'll never learn how to do the big thing if you don't go for it when you're young."

Have degree, will adapt

Looking for a career nowadays in a "cruel, jobless world" can be a daunting experience for young grads. However, as CLAIRE GRADY-SMITH, MA'12, reports, for those with imagination, flexibility, and some basic skills, a freelance life can be the solution.
Dean of Education, called me about a possible job. A friend of my parents had recommended me to her.

Rather than seeing my current employment as a negative exemplar of my general degree of ambition, Rena saw me as someone who could put on a brave face and make the most of a limited array of job prospects. She hired me as a marketer and jack-of-all-trades for Wintergreen Studios Press, an offshoot of the Wintergreen Studios she had started, as an educational retreat near Westport, Ontario (www.wintergreenstudios.com/).

There was a huge learning curve for most aspects of my new position. When Rena asked me to do the search engine optimization on the Wintergreen Studios website, I admitted to her that I had to Google the term. She laughed, and we got the job done, but it struck me how accommodating she was while I was learning the bottom rungs on my job's ladder. Of course in other ways I filled in gaps in Rena's knowledge. For example, I knew how social media could be harnessed to develop an audience as well as brand identity.

In the nine months I spent working full-time for Rena, I learned how to plan and execute high-profile galas, market books, host and build websites, use Adobe Illustrator, and write grant proposals to national funding bodies. My job was scaled back when the funding for my position dried up, but by then I had a solid skill set that I could parlay into a freelance lifestyle.

As a result of my involvement with Wintergreen's community network, I began getting job offers to do websites and marketing jobs. As a freelancer, I discovered how to listen to the specifications of a job and provide a realistic quote, how to troubleshoot issues without an expert supervisor, and how to manage my own life so I could still work part-time for Rena.

I have to admit that this life has not always been easy. Sometimes clients change their minds about jobs, or they don't request a cheque from their head office until the day you thought you'd be receiving it. At first, freelancers are regularly faced with rent due and not enough in the bank to buy dinner. I've learned that self-employment is like camping; you have to be prepared or you'll be dismally exposed to the elements.

There are so many moments, though, that make the freelance life worthwhile. I do more work in a year than most people, but I also have time during the day for yoga classes, working on a PhD proposal, making art, and having dinner with friends. My days take on a pattern even though my workload rises and falls with my clients' deadlines. All of it is manageable and respectful because, as a contractor and consultant, I'm a valuable member of each organization I work with.

My friends ask how I managed to become so lucky, and I tell them the same thing each time: figure out how to monetize your interests.

Forget the advice offered in that Waits article; never give up on an idea that could become your vocation because you'll be more knowledgeable about topics that you find fascinating. Maybe you're an avid Facebook user. Well, there are a lot of people out there who aren't, and perhaps a potential client is one of them. Think of an example from your life in which an event that used to attract five people now attracts 20 or 50 because of Facebook. Research how to write a media release. Find out what free event listings are available in your city and what publications exist in your client's field. With a strong and friendly pitch, you can land yourself a fun, short-term marketing contract. Zero job security, yes...but it could be in your field of interest and education, with hours that suit your other jobs or activities, and with people who admire your ambition and creativity.

Self-employment isn't for everyone. No question. You have to be confident and relatively outgoing. You also need equipment and time. I'm fortunate enough to have a Macbook Pro, for instance, so I was able to learn the Adobe Suite on a machine that can handle the application. I had a lucky break and learned skills while working on a long-term contract.

Some students and young alumni won't be able to find the time to learn new skills, but if you are able to find or make the time and you put together the necessary tools, I'd advise you to think strategically and be adaptable. Believe me, self-employment beats the heck out of working at a menial job or having no job at all.

My friends ask how I managed to become so lucky, and I tell them the same thing each time: Figure out how to monetize your interests.

The writer is the Marketing Director of Wintergreen Studios, sits on the board of the Kingston Arts Council, is an artist and writer, and has built websites and marketing plans for the Friends of Kingston Inner Harbour, Peace Quest, and other clients. She can be reached via email at claire.gradysmith@gmail.com.