Fostering a culture of entrepreneurship

Cultivation of creative capital is one of the things that defines world-class universities. I see creative capital as the capacity of our community to imagine and to express new possibilities through creative activity. It is inspiration, innovation and leadership. It requires curiosity and courage.

The creative arts—which flourish here at Victoria—are perhaps the purest expression of creativity but they are by no means the only place where creativity flourishes. Creativity is inherent to the research process, it drives innovation in design and it underpins the entrepreneurship that establishes new businesses and social endeavours.

Robby Lopez

When it comes to his Engineering studies, it’s the creative, hands-on side of problem solving that appeals to Robby Lopez. Robby loves being able to make an idea a reality and says Victoria provides plenty of opportunities to do that.

“Having an idea in my head, being able to turn it into a visualisation on the computer and then hold the end result in my hands is really awesome. And then to have it work and do what I want is amazing.”

He’s obviously pretty good at it too. Last year, Robby led a team of fellow Engineering students to take top honours in the Australasian National Instruments Autonomous Robotics Competition in Melbourne. The team beat 15 other teams from Australian and New Zealand universities with its autonomous mining robot, Michelangelo.

In the final, the robots were required to navigate an obstacle-filled course, and identify, pick up and move objects to designated locations in the shortest possible time.

Robby says he never imagined going to university and having the freedom—and support—to build a robot the way his team did for the competition.

“Definitely gained a lot of skills using products, services and software that are used in the real world. And we got to rub shoulders with big players in the robotics world as well!”

Robby says his team also learnt a lot through trial and error.

“I guess the screw-ups are all part of it and it’s good to just laugh about the mistakes and learn from them. In fact, our robot caught fire mid-testing, so that was fun to watch at least, but we talked to the lecturers afterwards and they really helped us pinpoint the problem and work forward from that.”

“I never thought I’d be able to do the things I’ve done at Victoria. Doing that robot project, having an idea and seeing it materialise, made me realise what I’m capable of.”

Alistair Brown

When PhD student Alistair Brown first enrolled at Victoria University, he didn’t picture himself being there for the long haul but studying Cell and Molecular Bioscience kept him coming back for more.

“I really like the idea of using bacteria to solve problems. People talk about nanotechnology and how great it would be if we had tiny machines we could shrink and put into the human body to, say, stitch up a heart. The great thing is, bacteria are already those tiny little machines. We can use them to do all sorts of things—engineer bacteria to eat a tumour, or something like that. I find that really exciting.”

The focus of Alistair’s PhD is an enzyme produced by a bacterial species that makes a blue pigment. Initially, Alistair used the enzyme to try and identify new antibiotics but he is now using it to detect glutamine levels in blood or urine.

“What we hope to do with this enzyme is to develop tests for certain diseases.”

In terms of real-world application, Alistair’s research has had the support of Victoria University’s commercialisation office, Viclink, something he believes has opened doors for him.

“When we approached Viclink we said ‘hey we’ve got this test we’re developing, we think it might have some commercial viability’. And they jumped on board really quickly and provided us with additional funding to help improve the product and help with the intellectual property side. They’ve also been great at connecting us to industry partners in New Zealand and overseas.”

For Alistair, the best thing about doing a PhD is the fact that you’re in a simulating voices heard by a schizophrenic person, Sarah partnered of people with schizophrenia understand what it’s like.”

So that’s why I landed on this idea, from wanting to help family members of people with schizophrenia understand what it’s like.”

Sarah Mokhtar

When she first came to Victoria as a 17 year old from Nelson, Sarah Mokhtar let her creative juices flow. “I had all sorts of strange design ideas, so when I started designing things in my first year, they were a little bit left field.”

Despite her unorthodox tendencies, Sarah’s lecturers were supportive and encouraging.

“They definitely make sure that their students are within the bounds, but also creating things that are quite different and ground breaking.”

Sarah completed an undergraduate degree in Interior Architecture before taking a design turn, completing a Graduate Diploma in Design Innovation and then embarking on a Master of Design Innovation.

As part of her Master’s, Sarah, who has an older sister with schizophrenia, developed a downloadable app and wearable technology scarf that simulates what it’s like to hear voices.

“When I decided to do my Master’s, I thought, what are the biggest challenges I’ve had in my life and how could I resolve them with design? So that’s why I landed on this idea, from wanting to help family members of people with schizophrenia understand what it’s like.”

Having attended a workshop as a teenager, which involved listening to a simulation of voices heard by a schizophrenic person, Sarah partnered with the organiser to develop the scarf and app. They both respond to the environment, creating a distracting experience for users as they go about their everyday activities.

She says completing her Master’s has been life changing. “It’s definitely allowed me to grow as a person and understand my strengths and weaknesses. I also appreciate who I am and that I can achieve more than I would have thought.”

“Victoria University has really helped me to nurture my personal project and has extended me. Victoria definitely helped me to produce the final outcome that I wanted.”

Fostering a culture of entrepreneurship

At Victoria, we place a strong emphasis on a multidisciplinary approach to creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. Of course, having an environment that is stimulating, encourages freedom of expression and gives people time to reflect is important, but we also recognise the importance of being open to ideas from outside our area of expertise. Ideas are better connected than protected—it is the coming together of new ideas that sparks new possibilities and that is at the heart of innovation.

We are developing an entrepreneurial ecosystem at Victoria. Our students are given opportunities to engage with others from different disciplines—writers with engineers, designers with health clinicians and scientists with 3D-printing experts. We have staff engaged in cross-disciplinary research and we have student entrepreneurship clubs. Victoria will continue to foster an entrepreneurial spirit among our staff and students, nurture the ideas that spring from it and then partner with others who have the expertise to progress them. We already work closely with a number of government agencies and national and regional facilities based in Wellington and with businesses located in the capital city. Expanding those partnerships and forging new ones will be a priority for us in the future.

Grant Guilford

Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University of Wellington

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