



Catalyst Inc

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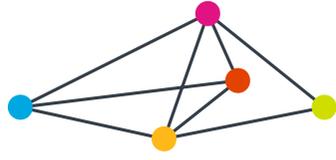


EXCELLENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

AT THE HEART OF INNOVATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Catalyst Inc is built upon the deep belief that in Northern Ireland we have a community of innovators so powerful they can change the world. We are a not-for-profit organisation that invests the surplus generated from our agile workspace and facilities to provide the underwriting necessary for the community-led development of our entrepreneurial innovation ecosystem providing expert mentorship, fast-track programmes, a connected network and smart investment.





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Advancing the Knowledge Economy in Northern Ireland

As Chief Executive of Catalyst Inc, Dr. Norman Apsley OBE FREng FInstP FIAE is a man at the heart of stimulating innovation in Northern Ireland. Here he shares the story so far...

Created in 1999 to support the vision for a vibrant new knowledge economy in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Science Park has exceeded all major targets and growth expectations. We are now embarking on our next stage of evolution, re-envisioned as Catalyst Inc.

The most important remit of the organisation's rebrand was to ensure an authentic representation of who we are and what we do. Through a series of workshops and listening exercises the definition of our modus operandi became clear. We are an active force, a catalyst accelerating positive change that is inclusive with regards the benefits to, and participation of, our entire society.

Catalyst Inc is built upon the deep belief that in Northern Ireland we have a community of innovators so powerful they can change the world. We provide the home, networks and empathy to support this talent and ambition to develop world leading products and services that will transform Northern Ireland into one of the most entrepreneurial knowledge economies in Europe.

Key to the success of our model is the diversity of organisations based at, and engaging with, Catalyst Inc (major technology corporations, indigenous scaling companies and start ups) co-located with world-class research (Queen's University ECIT/CSIT centres) all of which has created a fertile ground for growth.

As I write, 160 companies employing over 2,600 engineers, researchers, entrepreneurs and executives are working from our campuses in Belfast, Derry/ Londonderry and soon to be Ballymena.

Uniquely, Catalyst Inc provides much more than state-of-the-art facilities. We are a not-for-profit organisation that invests the surplus generated from our agile workspace and facilities to provide the underwriting necessary for the community-led development of our entrepreneurial innovation ecosystem providing expert mentorship, fast-track programmes, a connected network and smart investment through Connect and the Halo Angel ^{PLUS} Network.

“With Connect we enable our most experienced people to share their experiences, contacts and collective intelligence to give our entrepreneurs an advantage.”

With Connect, we believe that entrepreneurs are the most important people to the future of Northern Ireland’s economy. We also know that being an entrepreneur is lonely, hard and nearly everyone is winging it. So, we provide a way for our most experienced people to volunteer their time to share their experiences, contacts and collective intelligence to give our entrepreneurs an advantage. The result is a powerful network; a community of researchers, experienced entrepreneurs, executives, investors, legal and financial experts and our diaspora united together to help make our most promising entrepreneurs more successful.

The tables in our public spaces, as often as not, are covered in laptops, surrounded by animated groups of people, young and old, absorbed in earnest debate. Our mantra is “the most promising new businesses mentored by the region’s most experienced, pro bono and unconditionally”.

THE PHYSICAL SPACE AND OPEN ATMOSPHERE LINKING ACADEME, ENTERPRISE, BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT IS KEY TO OUR COMMON SUCCESS.

Our story began in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement and the formal ending of the internecine conflict known as “The Troubles”. This opened the way to local and international investment but, sadly, the economy was not in a good state after thirty years of destruction.

Fortunately, long-term respect and appreciation for learning in all disciplines had continued throughout. Academic children were encouraged to the professions and, if there were no jobs locally, they were mobile, prized in every developed economy across the world. They formed a new diaspora and have become a resource and a reservoir of international advocacy and support for our work today. The non-academic had been dependent on mainstays such as Harland and Wolff, Shorts-Bombardier and FG Wilson who under the relentless pressure of global markets were changing, painfully, to become the worldclass ventures they are today.

Everybody knew that change was necessary especially when it was reported that only one quarter of the 250 engineers graduating in 1998 had found jobs in the NI economy as engineers. Professor Best, in his report diagnosed the need for a focus on entrepreneurial companies, helping them to form and to grow, fuelled by the outstanding science and technology in the universities.

The Northern Ireland Science Park Foundation Ltd was created in 1999 by what is now the Department for the Economy, as a not for profit and limited by guarantee company with the late Professor Ernest Shannon CBE FREng appointed as Chairman.

INTEGRAL TO THE PROJECT WERE THE UNIVERSITIES, ULSTER UNIVERSITY AND QUEENS UNIVERSITY BELFAST.

As strong advocates for Science Parks and technology transfer, their Vice Chancellors, together with two department appointees, formed the first Board of the company. They sought out a headquarters site, highly connected and as close to the centres of research and technology as possible, and, with the help and cooperation of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, chose the north end of Queens Island after which I entered the story on June 1, 2000.

Leaving Northern Ireland with a First in Physics from the (then) New University of Ulster, I undertook a PhD at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge University. When my time in Cambridge was up, I had a consuming interest in the application of science to creating solutions to real life problems; so began my career in Applied Research.

I joined a government laboratory in Malvern in the West Midlands (now part of QinetiQ plc). The laboratory achieved 13 Queens Awards for Technology between 1980 and 1992.



> Reception at Buckingham Palace



> Connect Young Founders



> Posthumous Special Innovation Award for Lord Ballyedmond OBE



“Across all of its campuses, Catalyst Inc is but the latest embodiment of Northern Ireland’s creative and innovative history, a heritage of creative curiosity and inventive spirit that lives on to this day.”

As UK Government cuts deepened, it was my job to find replacement funds. Travelling across the developed world, I learned that in our (European) culture, firms are no less hungry for innovation but they prefer to buy the innovation fully formed and tested. So began my keen interest in Science Parks, places adjunct to centres of research, academia and corporate, where industry, entrepreneurs, risk capitalists and researchers may work and interact as peers. The best such places, I found, could become sustainable businesses in their own right, able to fuel the peer-to-peer interactions.

THIS LED DIRECTLY TO THE MODEL MY FOUNDING CHAIRMAN AND I ESPOUSED FOR THE NI SCIENCE PARK.

Initial negotiations for government investment and the site, in what had become Titanic Quarter, completed in mid-2002 and building began on the historic Thompson Triangle.

During the run-up, I had worked with a Belfast City Council established organisation, Investment Belfast (IBel). Innovative projects were started such as the £10k Science-based business start competition, a Business Angels club, mentoring for young businesses and a physical incubator. These knowledge-based projects were transferred to the Science Park when IBel ceased trading in 2007.

Most fortuitously, at that time, a young, twice-successful graduate entrepreneur, Steve Orr, returned from California with first-hand experience of the San Diego organisation, Connect, acknowledged by many (including Harvard’s Michael Porter and the UK’s Lord Sainsbury) as the major stimulus for the post-Cold War reinvention of that US city. He joined the complement of the Science Park and won a five year trial of the Connect methodology.



> Plans for ECOS



> Innovation Centre, Derry



> The Legacy Building

“Connect is today an integral part of Catalyst Inc in all that it does and in each of its growing number of locations.”

Connect is today an integral part of what we do in each of our growing number of locations and under the management of the Science Park, the Halo Angel ^{PLUS} Network has evolved successfully into a vehicle to help entrepreneurs find risk capital in many ways, including Pitch at the Palace, an initiative of HRH The Duke of York, Patron of our Trust.

THROUGHOUT, THE LONG AND DEEP RELATIONSHIP WITH UNIVERSITY RESEARCH AND WIDER EDUCATION HAS BEEN PIVOTAL.

First to back the early Science Park was my old friend and colleague, Professor John McCanny. He and others at Queens University were able to win the University’s backing to place his new multi-disciplinary research concept on the Science Park, adjacent to the Innovation Centre. Thus the iconic Electronics, Communication and Information Technology Institute (ECIT) became the Science Park’s research flagship. Co-location allowed coevolution and when, as a result of the quality of available staff and of global digital connectivity, corporations like CITI, Fidessa, Polaris and L&T Infotech began to make Belfast a hub for Forex, ECIT was ready, willing and very able to win a major place in UK academic research as a centre for Cyber Security.

The Science Park had been conceived from the start as a full Northern Ireland operation on a hub-and-spoke model, with the hub in Greater Belfast and spokes as required in support of sub-regional economic ambitions. A successful bid for EU funding, in partnership with Letterkenny Institute of Technology, LYIT, and under the aegis of the Northwest Region Cross Border Group, has allowed the creation of the first successful spokes in Derry/Londonderry and Letterkenny. Meanwhile in Ballymena, we have been working with the new Mid and East Antrim District Council to redevelop the ECOS building into a shared workspace Innovation Centre, while continuing to inspire the region’s children, teachers and parents with its innovation history and future prospects for sustainable manufacturing and food production.

Across all of its campuses, Catalyst Inc is but the latest embodiment of Northern Ireland’s creative and innovative history, a heritage of creative curiosity and inventive spirit that lives on to this day. On our Belfast campus the physical remains are most visible in the form of Titanic’s Dock and Pump-House. This fine Victorian and Edwardian building contains tangible artefacts of the age of steam and high pressure water, innovations that were used to create the world’s largest ships of their day.

In a nutshell, that is what Catalyst Inc is about: a trusted and exciting place for academe, industry, commerce and the public (especially young people) to meet, to exchange and to develop ideas for our economy and, most of all, not only to aspire to take part in the knowledge economy but to expect to succeed.

> Catalyst Inc Generation Innovation Members





Acknowledgements

I have written this story from a very personal point of view but Catalyst Inc, the trading name of the Northern Ireland Science Park, has not been the creation of one person. The list would double the length of this piece. Suffice to say, political, public, private and academic sectors have all given huge support to the project. In turn, each economy Minister (Reg (now Lord) Empey, Ian Pearson and, especially, the long term incumbent and now First Minister, Arlene Foster) has taken risks on our behalf. Their departments have followed suit under several Permanent Secretaries and their staff. I owe particular thanks to (now Sir) Bruce Robinson and his team as the first to back the fledgling Science Park. Then come my Chairmen and their boards (Ernest Shannon, Franklin Adair, Frank Hewitt and, currently Richard (Dick) Milliken). Each has added their distinctive stamp to the Science Park of today. Last but not least, my heartfelt thanks must go to my team; from the lowest to the highest, they have given their energy and talent to the project and I acknowledge the impossibility of the task without each and every one of them.

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