Pressing the Accelerator on Growth



What is an accelerator? An accelerator is an entity that provides a fixed-term, cohort-based program designed to accelerate growth and support disruptive and innovative early-stage businesses. They can be generalist or specialist and are located all around the world.

Who are they? Probably the most well-known accelerator is Y Combinator (US), which is active in most sectors, including life sciences. Other particularly active biotech and life science accelerators include JLabs (US), Startup Health (US), BioCity (UK) and Illumina (US). Closer to home of the authors are Accelerate@Babraham (Cambridge, UK) and Start Codon (Cambridge, UK), which debuted its first cohort in 2020. Not all accelerators are the same though, so it is important to do the research to ensure they are the best 'fit' for the business (stage, location, specialism, oversight and financing level).

What do they do? There are many reasons why founders are attracted to an accelerator program. They provide an intense and immersive education in the life of a start-up, covering strategy, sales, marketing, communication, risk management, finance and legal matters. Perhaps the most popular reason is mentorship from experienced practitioners, investors and entrepreneurs, whose advice and relationships can be vital as the company grows. Although the level of financing is not normally substantial, it is nevertheless welcome and participation in a program can sometimes make future fundraising easier, as supported by the statistics. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain and leverage new connections with angel and institutional investors during and after the program.

Why are they important? Starting any business is difficult and can be isolating. As a result of lockdown and social distancing measures, isolation is a key concern for many and so building a business and developing relationships is even more challenging. Accelerators do not guarantee success and are not the only route, but they can provide valuable access to a community of entrepreneurs and mentorship and drive a business forward in a protected environment.