BUSINESS INCUBATION AND ENTREPRENEURIAL COMPETENCIES: AN EXPLORATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

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Introduction

This research was aimed at developing a conceptual framework to provide a foundation for studying the relationship between business incubation and entrepreneurial competencies. While there are over 3,000 business incubators worldwide and the phenomena of business incubation to support entrepreneurial ventures has grown rapidly over the last 3 decades (European Commission, 2000); there remains a significant gap in knowledge regarding whether the incubation process is actually effective (Hackett & Dilts, 2004). In much of the research on incubation, the incubator, rather than the ‘incubatee’ (entrepreneur / entrepreneurial team) is the unit of analysis. Among the few studies on incubates, the measure of success has been ‘business survival’, ‘business growth’, ‘effective technology transfer’ or ‘getting to market’ (see Phan and Siegel (2006) for a comprehensive review of the research).

O’Connor, Burnett and Hancock (2009) examined the relationship between business incubation and education and found that both education and incubation revolved around the development of opportunity. They defined the incubation process as one which provided support services, networking opportunities, mentoring and physical space while education was aimed at developing the entrepreneur rather than their business and was more concerned with delivering the skills and knowledge to manage and act upon opportunities. We argue that the learning aspect of incubation has been largely ignored and many ventures may have ‘failed’ but the entrepreneurs have benefited from the incubation learning process, which in turn, has flow on benefits that may be easily overlooked. In this paper, we report on the findings of the first phase of a research project involving incubatees and incubator managers in Adelaide and Singapore to explicate the learning experience of incubatees.

Background to the Research

Developing new ventures and stimulating new industries, especially in the knowledge-intensive sector is an Australian National Research Priority (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2008). This is also a major priority of the Technopreneurship 21 (T21) drive which is part of the Singapore 21 Masterplan (S21 Facilitation Committee, 2003). Both countries recognise the need for innovation to transform their economies but recognise the difficulty and risks in doing so. Business incubation is acknowledged as a means to help minimise the risks while maximising survival and growth of these new ventures.

However, there is paucity in the literature on research that investigates whether the incubation process is actually effective (Hackett & Dilts, 2004) and past studies have highlighted this deficiency. For instance, the OECD (1999: p?) found that “Despite the investment of significant public funds, few science parks in Australia are credited with success”. It would seem that
within the university context, incubation efforts in Australia were less effective than they were anticipated to be. Similarly, in Singapore, according to the Straits Times (2007) with S$40m being allocated to seed digital start-ups through an incubation scheme that two thirds of the funds’ recipients either failed or were struggling.

The research also makes a contribution by addressing concerns regarding the current North American bias in entrepreneurship research (Aldrich, 2000) and furthermore addresses a lack of comparative studies (Man & Lau, 2005). As Cassis and Minoglou (2006:3-4) note, “entrepreneurs, whatever definition is given to them, operate within an economic, institutional and cultural framework that is, to a very large extent, specific to each country”, an issue that Davidsson (2004) acknowledges, should be given more consideration in entrepreneurship research.

Business Incubation Processes

According to Lewis (2002), the first formal business incubator opened its doors in 1959 and now there are more than 6000 incubators worldwide (NBIA, 2006). A business incubator is defined as a shared facility that provides its incubatees with “a strategic, value-adding intervention system of monitoring and business assistance. This system controls and links resources with the objective of facilitating the successful new venture development of the incubatees while simultaneously containing the cost of their potential failure” (Hackett & Diltz, 2004:57).

Both Australia and Singapore support business incubation, so our research was motivated by the question of whether the investment can be justified on alternate measures and specifically whether business incubators prepared better and more entrepreneurs who are likely to go on to produce entrepreneurial success in forms other than the original business start-up they started with. These questions led us to look at and explore the business incubation experience and the competencies that business incubation developed amongst its incubatees.

Business incubator programs also serve different purposes. Grimaldi and Grandi (2005) suggested that the incubator concept promotes an effective means for incubator participants to integrate the acquisition of resources and start-up management techniques. The business incubator program is also recognized as a mechanism for uplifting the economy by encouraging development of new practical entrepreneurial ideas and also increases the likelihood of a person establishing companies (Grimaldi and Grandi, 2005, Aeroudt, 2004). O’Connor et al. (2009) also suggested that a business incubator program can be part of an entrepreneurship education system and De Foite et al. (2003) add that they can act as a structured training program. Smilor (1987) summarised the incubation process to illustrate the different inputs and outputs which is demonstrated by Figure 1 below. However, notably Hackett and Diltz (2004) found that “little progress had been made toward understanding how incubatees develop within an incubator”.

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Entrepreneurial Competencies

Entrepreneurial competencies can be defined as those competencies that involve the creation, management, support and development of the ideas that entrepreneur(s) subsequently introduce into a market (Chandler & Hanks, 1994). Entrepreneurial competencies emphasize the entrepreneurs’ actual abilities to execute entrepreneurial tasks (Ahmad, 2007, Man & Lau, 2000). Literatures in this area are segregated into two main areas. First, competencies as attributes of a person such as his/her knowledge, skills and abilities (Man, 2006; Ahmad, 2007), and second, competencies as a standard of outcome or result (Rowe, 1995, Hoffman, 1999). The first area highlights that entrepreneurial competencies can be identified as discrete items while the second illustrates the usefulness of examining individual behavioural outputs in assessing competencies. These literatures make clear the importance of recognizing that entrepreneurial experience plays a major role in forming entrepreneurial competencies while simultaneously it is only possible to assess entrepreneurial competence by drawing upon and examining an individual’s entrepreneurial experience. An integrative review of the literature conducted on the earlier models of entrepreneurial competencies generated nine behavioural competencies that are of interest in this study (refer to Table 1).

Table 1. Areas of Entrepreneurial Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entrepreneurial Competency Domain</th>
<th>Examples of behaviour reflecting the competency domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Conceptual</td>
<td>Explore new ideas, take reasonable job-related risks, treat new problems as opportunities, monitor progress toward objectives in risky actions, understand the broader business implications of ideas and issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Strategic</td>
<td>Monitor progress toward strategic goals, prioritise work in alignment with business goals, identify long term issues, problems or opportunities, align current actions with strategic goals, redesign business to better meet long term objectives, determine strategic actions by weighing costs and benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Relationship</td>
<td>Negotiate with others, maintain a personal network of work contacts, interact effectively with others, develop long term trusting relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Entrepreneurial Competency Domain | Examples of behaviour reflecting the competency domain
---|---
with others, promote teamwork.

(4) Opportunity | Perceive unmet consumer needs, seize high quality business opportunities, actively look for products or services that provide real benefit to customers, identify goods or services that the customer wants.

(5) Organising & Leading | Plan the organisation of different resources, keep the organisation running smoothly, organise resources, coordinate tasks, lead subordinates, delegate effectively, and energise team to work towards goal.

(6) Learning | Learn as much as I can in my field, learn from a variety of means, learn proactively, keep up to date in my field, apply learned skills and knowledge to actual practices.

(7) Personal | Recognise and work on own shortcomings, prioritise tasks to manage time, manage own career development, motivate myself to function at an optimum level of performance, identify strengths and weaknesses and match them with opportunities and threats.

(8) Ethical | Be honest and transparent in business dealings, be committed to offering products/services at fair prices, take responsibility and be accountable for own actions.

(9) Social Responsibility | Forge relationship with charitable organisations, engage voluntarily in community activities, show concern for the staff welfare, and create job opportunities within the local community.

Research Aims

The research aimed to understand whether incubators benefited the budding entrepreneur by testing whether the incubation process in different cultural contexts supported the development of entrepreneurial competencies. This first phase of the research was intended to provide a base of knowledge upon which a more robust and sustainable business incubation processes may be built that could positively contribute to the national innovation system and economy. The research objectives are defined as:

- To understand how and whether business incubation develops entrepreneurial competencies in different contexts (Singapore and Australia)
- To conduct interviews with incubatees, incubator managers and industry experts to understand differences in expectations and experience
- To survey incubatees in contrasting geographic and environmental contexts to better understand the developed competencies

Research Method

The research was designed to ascertain and define a set of business incubation experiences that characterise the business incubation process across different cultural settings. The primary data collection method involved in-depth semi-structured interviews that were
conducted to explore the coincidence of incubation experience with the development of entrepreneurial competencies. By using cross-cultural data, it helped reduce context-specific findings and allowed a degree of broader generalisation of concepts on business incubation and competencies that contribute to entrepreneurship. A total of 21 interviews were conducted (10 in Singapore and 11 in South Australia; 14 among incubatees and 7 among incubator managers and mentors). The interviews were transcribed and analysed with the aid of an open coding technique (Strauss & Corbin 1990) and then categorised into the nine competency areas depending on how the coded item fitted with a general description of the competency.

Supporting the qualitative data was a survey on the competencies of individuals who underwent business incubation as compared to those who did not and these were analysed using non-parametric tests. Specifically, nine competency areas were measured namely Conceptual, Strategic, Relationship, Opportunity, Organising & Leading, Learning, Personal, Ethics, and Social Responsibility. Participants responded to the survey on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely not competent) to 5 (completely competent).

**Results**

The qualitative analysis began by coding references to learning and competencies from the transcribed interviews. The analysis first considered the differences in aggregated coded responses between Singapore and Adelaide. This analysis suggested differences between the types of incubation models adopted by each region. In the case of Singapore there was an emphasis placed on funding and mentoring for start-ups to facilitate rapid growth while the Adelaide model emphasised collaboration and skills development. We termed these apparent differences in models the ‘leveraged growth’ and ‘organic growth’ for the respective regions.

The next analysis progressed by distinguishing between the responses of incubator managers, incubator mentors and incubator tenants combining the data of each group from both regions. In terms of developing entrepreneurial competencies, incubator managers from both countries tended to focus on filling the gaps that prevent or restrain a new venture’s growth. The mentors added another dimension to this view by highlighting the support the entrepreneur received from experienced advisors with useful personal connections. However, among the incubatees, the value of the incubation experience extended once again to include the value of experiential learning and the development of shared experiences or a sense of community. The increasing and deeper awareness of what the incubator environment offers is reflected in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incubator Managers “Filling the gaps”</th>
<th>Mentors “Paving the way”</th>
<th>Incubatees “Full circle growth”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experienced guidance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal connections</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer learning</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The final step in the qualitative analysis categorised the 109 open coded items relating to learning and competencies of all the incubator tenants into the framework of nine competencies. Twenty (20) coded items were excluded as they either related to factors of context or resources or fell outside of the interests of individual competencies and under a broader heading of general learning commentary. Table 2 indicates the number of coded items that were assessed as relating to each specific competency category. The primary references to competencies facilitated by the incubator experience was ‘Relationships’ with 22% of the codes falling into this category. The next four most prevalent competency categories were ‘Learning’ (21%), ‘Strategic’ (16%), ‘Organising and Leading’ (16%) and ‘Personal’ (13%). Relatively few codes were allocated to ‘Ethical’ (4%) and ‘Social Responsibility’ (3%) while only one (1) code could be allocated to ‘Conceptual’ and none to ‘Opportunity’. Refer to Table 2 for an outline of these findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>No. of related codes</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising and Leading</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Responsibility</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total valid responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>89</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through this analysis it was apparent from the interviews and analysis of the incubator programs, that the entrepreneurial education that was delivered by the business incubators was similar to that in business education programs in university, albeit in a more experiential manner. To examine whether these were really effective, a survey, using scales developed by Ahmad (2007) and Man and Lau (2005) was conducted among individuals who had undergone business incubation versus those who had merely undertaken business or entrepreneurship education courses in university. There were 54 usable responses out of 249, a response rate of 22%. The data was analysed using Mann-Whitney U Tests (non-parametric, ordinal data, 2 independent groups). Table 3 lists the findings with respect to significant differences between the two groups.
Table 3 Mann-Whitney U Test results for Incubatees versus Managers undergoing Entrepreneurship Education Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entrepreneurial Competencies</th>
<th>Significantly Different</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Not significantly different (P &gt;= 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Marginally significant (P &lt; 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Highly significantly different (P &lt; 0.001, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Not significantly different (P &gt;= 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising and Leading</td>
<td>Not significantly different (P &gt;= 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Not significantly different (P &gt;= 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Not significantly different (P &gt;= 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>Not significantly different (P &gt;= 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Responsibility</td>
<td>Not significantly different (P &gt;= 0.05, two-tailed test).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the nine entrepreneurial competency areas examined, we found that those who had undergone business incubation were significantly different in two competency areas when compared to those who studied entrepreneurship namely Opportunity (p< 0.001) and Conceptual (p< 0.05). This may reinforce the idea that business incubators play an important role by not only providing resources for new ventures but also providing a ‘safe’ place for entrepreneurs to train and develop intangible, but important entrepreneurial competencies. However, on further discussion with incubator managers and incubatees, this finding could also be caused by selection bias linked to the quality and calibre of the opportunity and concept submitted for the selection and admission process for the incubators. In other words, to occupy a place in an incubator a tenant would generally be accepted based upon evidence of their opportunity and conceptual competencies used to develop their application.

Discussion

Despite research that identifies the different business cultures between Singapore and Australia (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998), our research found that there were many similarities in approaches to business incubation and the experiences of the incubatees. Notwithstanding the different expectations on how the incubator support manifested in growth of the firm, the fundamental programs and services provided were similar. Perhaps this is because incubation models are largely imported from other countries (e.g. USA and Israel).

With respect to coding, many of the items could easily be identified within the category of one competency. For instance the phrase relayed by one incubatee ‘realising that no one else is going to be doing it for me and it’s like, alright I’ve got be that person’ was readily coded as a ‘personal development’ and easily categorised as a Personal competency. However, there were some items that were more problematic that seemed to suggest two codes simultaneously. An example of this can be seen in the following extract:

“...if you can share your customers with other people, who have got different products and services to what you offer, and they do the same, your business grows quicker, and that’s the thing, why weren’t we sort of sharing ideas and sharing capabilities, you can effectively grow your business quicker”.

This text was coded ‘Sharing customers’ and clearly it has an element of the social responsibility competency to create job opportunities within the local (incubator) community.
However, it also relies on the relationships competency to interact effectively with others, develop long term trusting relationships with others; promote teamwork. In the interests of simplicity each code was only categorised to one competency (in this case social responsibility) but this does highlight that there are dependency relationships within the competency schema which need to be highlighted and addressed in order to construct discrete measurement items.

Clearly much of the incubation effort and the networked environment of an incubator are directed toward sustaining the early stage venture. This places an emphasis on developing competencies under the categories of relationships, strategic, organising and leading. Also perhaps obvious is that the learning competency should be prominent in any analysis such as that conducted by this research as the entrepreneur is thrust within a context that often requires rapid learning.

Perhaps less anticipated in the findings is the relatively low reference to competencies around ethics and social responsibility. Interestingly, the respondents who referenced this category of competency were of mature age and through their experience they seemed to have come to realise the interdependency of these competencies with the successful realisation of other competencies. In this instance it was the ethical and social responsibility competencies that were brought to the incubator by the incubator tenants rather than something that was particularly referenced and developed by the incubator program itself. It is likely (and to some extent evidenced) though that the mentors bring a lot of ‘wise guidance’ to the incubator setting and therefore the ethical and social responsibility competencies may be more tacit in representation through these mentor associations.

The most striking observation from the qualitative data was the very little to no reference to the conceptual and opportunity competencies. It may suggest that once in an incubator these competencies become less relevant, perhaps as the opportunity is deemed defined and the conceptualisation of new products and services is thought to be accomplished. This theory is at least partly supported by the survey findings that distinguished both the conceptual and opportunity competencies of incubator tenants from that of students enrolled in an entrepreneurship education program. While it may be the case that at least some incubator programs contribute to building these competencies, it certainly leaves open and draws attention to the very real need for education to foster these area of competencies among its student base.

Extending O’Connor’s et al (2009) earlier finding, the demarcation between the learning experience within the incubator and that of education might plausibly be defined by the nature of the opportunity focus. Education develops the recognition and formation of an opportunity and incubation focuses on the conversion and exploitation of opportunity.

Implications

In terms of implications for practice, both Singapore and Australia as nations acknowledge that business incubation is a means to help minimise the risks while maximising survival and growth of new ventures and this research provides a basis for building more robust and sustainable business incubation processes which forms an important part of the national innovation system and economy. The study has implications for incubator managers, those who fund incubators, policy-makers and government agencies and educators.

The findings suggest that a learning approach should be incorporated within the assessment and evaluation of incubator performance. By adopting a learning approach to examine the benefit of the incubation process there may be justification that can be made for supporting this
form of activity based upon increases in human capital measures rather than just raw measures of new start-up businesses.

It would appear that incubators do little to support and develop two primary competencies that are fundamental to entrepreneurship; opportunity and conceptual competencies. Although the research is based on a relatively small sample the implication is important as it highlights the importance of self-selection of those who apply for assistance through business incubation. The evidence here suggests that the opportunity and conceptual competencies are keys to successful entry into an incubator. However, the apparent lack of attention given to these particular competence areas once in an incubator may also play a role in undermining the potential business success of the applicant and hence the perception of effectiveness of the incubation process. The tacit assumption embedded into the incubator tenant’s business case may be that the model they begin with is to be leveraged with little or no further development and experimentation. Therefore, there becomes a reliance on pushing the business down the one path that may or may not provide a sound basis for a sustainable business.

The possible resolution to this position may also be found among the findings. It is quite explicit from both the Singapore and South Australian respondents that the incubator contributes to both community and personal development. It is proposed that the business incubation model should be underpinned by a concept of ‘community of practice’ (see Figure 3). If this community of practice also fostered greater shared opportunity and conceptual competency development it may produce extraordinary results with businesses teaming, sharing, re-forming and re-shaping to respond to market and customer needs in a far more effective manner.

A further implication of this study for incubators is that the application process tends to attract those who may start with stronger opportunity and conceptual competencies. Therefore, the priority concern of the incubator should perhaps first fall to the soundness of the business case and secondly attention should be paid to the individual competency needs. In order to accelerate businesses through an incubation program the incubator services should provide support for both the development of the business and the individual competency needs. By furnishing appropriate competency development the incubator develops self-sustaining abilities beyond that which can be directly provided while within the confines of the incubator.

Figure 3 A proposed Revised Incubator Model
While business incubators may be able to improve the competencies of individual business participants the survey findings suggest that there is also a need for educators to find ways of improving the opportunity and conceptual skills of those who could apply to the incubator setting. It would seem that if this is a necessary competency to succeed in the business incubator application process that the best and logical place for developing these competencies would be within the education sector.

**Limitations**

This research was conducted as the first step toward understanding how business incubation contributes to developing entrepreneurial competencies. As such it has adopted a narrow sample frame and acquired limited data to explore the premise that business incubators should adopt measures of human capital as a basis to evaluate performance. While the findings are suggestive, it is still necessary to further validate and explore the concepts across a wider sample frame.

The perspective of competencies was considered largely from the perspective of the incubatee and some may argue that this perspective may be too narrow and uninformed; nascent entrepreneurs do not know what they don’t know. The limited data collected from incubator managers and mentors prohibited any really useful exploration of competencies from these differing perspectives although it was clear that the views between these groups may vary. Obtaining a variety of perspectives on the competencies would certainly strengthen the study.

**Further research**

To strengthen this research further research is proposed that will acquire data from varying incubator contexts across international boundaries and from incubators managed by different stakeholder groups. The principle questions that emerge are whether the varying interests of stakeholders, differing pools of applicants (for instance from universities or the general public, youth or mature age), contrasting
socioeconomic contexts or technical focus of business incubators affect or influence the competencies needed or provided.

The collection of further quantitative data on the competencies would assist in modeling of the dependencies and relationships. Other competencies are also suggested in the literature that relate to familism and technical skills which remain unexplored in this particular research. There is further potential to explore the process or patterns of competence transference between mentors and the entrepreneur or between peers. Of course there are the overarching questions relating to effectiveness of incubators in developing competencies and whether over time the acquisition and development of competencies by entrepreneurs do contribute to longer term growth and development patterns within regions and communities.

Another opportunity for further research is the business incubator participants themselves. Given that significant differences occurred between those in incubation and those in unassisted education with respect to opportunity and conceptual competencies it would be interesting to explore where and how these participants acquired such competencies.

Conclusion

As an exploratory study on the role business incubators play in developing entrepreneurial competencies, this research provides early evidence of the benefits of adopting a learning approach in examining the performance of incubators and it suggests opportunities for further development by business incubators. Business incubation appears to be a good platform for developing the competencies required to develop and manage a new venture. However, there also seemed to be deficiencies in the competency sets provided especially with respect to developing opportunity and conceptual skills. Importantly, it seems that accepted incubator applicants may be advantaged by entering the incubator environment with higher levels of opportunity and conceptual competencies, although with further development of these competencies there may be potential for better overall incubator performances.

The concept of developing a tighter and focused community of practice within the incubator emerges as a key finding. With better integration and cross fertilization of ideas and a collaborative approach to developing customers and meeting customer needs, the success of the participating businesses may be leveraged beyond that which the contribution of individual business may achieve. The competency framework provides a basic reference point from which individual entrepreneurs can be assessed. The role of the incubator thereafter is to facilitate not only the growth of the business but also the growth in skills and knowledge of the would-be entrepreneurs.

References


Straits Times (2007), 26 May, $40m Fund for Digital Start-ups, p.H10