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A Grain of an Idea Grows Into a Successful Product

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Abstract: A Newcastle-based start-up that has developed a platform technology to help Australian winemakers and scientists improve the quality of their grapes by providing real-time analysis of their samples. The software is today a standalone product and used across Australia.

Keywords: Hone, wine, real-time decision making, farmers

1. The success story—Hone

Hone has developed a platform technology that gives farmers the ability to make informed decisions in real-time with no disruptions. The Hone device is a complete platform that attaches to the back of a smartphone and uses spectroscopy techniques[1] to assess the chemical traits of any solid or liquid. The data captured by the device is transferred to an artificial intelligence (AI) cloud via Hone's smartphone app and decoded for the quantitative or qualitative variables of interest the user has specified for that sample.

Using winemaking as an example, Hone's platform can be utilised throughout the entire winemaking cycle, from the analysis of soil nutrients to the uptake of nutrients by a vine, through to the sugar, tannin, and acid levels of the fruit itself. The same analysis can be applied from crush to bottling, allowing the winemaker to monitor for the desired chemical balance or to provide early detection of unwanted chemical traits. Hone's technology allows a winemaker to make key decisions about each and every vintage within seconds.

2. Where did it start and the motivation?

In 2014, then PhD students Antony, William, and Jamie participated in a project attempting to breed the best version of cereal grain for a biofuels project. A significant hurdle in this area is that analysing samples was time-consuming and expensive. With early backing from the University of Newcastle, angel investors, and the Australian government, Hone's co-founders have successfully revolutionised what has been a traditionally very slow, arduous, and expensive process for farmers.

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The early work was supported by a grant from HMRI in a medical imaging lab, providing an environment to evaluate their initial idea for a handheld spectrometer. The funding also allowed the team to purchase a small farm, which became their company's R&D headquarters. Three high-risk decisions for three struggling PhD students, but three decisions which spurred the development of an idea which would quickly become viable "It was only through the initial support of the University of Newcastle, the Hunter Medical Research Institute (HMRI), and individual donors that we were able to kick-start a lab and eventually develop the technology that underpins Hone," Antony said.

Figure 1. Photo of Dr. Anthony Martin, the founder of the smarter crop testing hardware and software—Hone.

3. The journey so far

In 2016, Hone was selected for CSIRO's ON Prime pre-accelerator program, to understand market trends and fit to develop their MVP further. "You're constantly thinking, "in six months' time, it's almost certain this will fall apart", and then it doesn't. Over time it gets more and more stable, and you start getting customers and return business, and you think 'maybe we're okay'," says Antony. Six years on, the Hone team has developed and commercialised their technology, which evaluates the properties of soil, crops, and grain samples in the field without the need for laboratories. Kick-starting their idea while still part of the University of Newcastle ecosystem, gave the co-founders access to talent. Software engineer, Peter Tylee, joined the team early on as Chief Technology Officer, Simon Wheeler conducted lab testing, and Brenton Bray was the hardware engineer.

A string of funding success has provided financial backing, including securing an NSW Government Minimum Viable Product grant, early-stage investment with Hunter Angels, and the Federal Government's Accelerating Commercialisation grant. Most recently, Hone was awarded $837,000 from the NSW Physical Sciences Fund to further develop its technology in partnership with the Australian Wine Research Institute.

4. Look into the future

The future is limitless for the team at Hone, who have already successfully launched their software component as a standalone product. More than 400 farmers and scientists across Australia are already using Hone's platform to conduct more than 250,000 lab tests, and they have partnered with many of Australia's leading laboratories, including CSIRO. Expecting to launch the handheld spectrometer in 2020 commercially, Hone is aiming to take its product global. The team is already in discussions with some of the largest grain handlers in France, US, and India.

The company

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Siobhan Curran is the Manager of the University of Newcastle's Integrated Innovation Network (I2N), an initiative that drives new venture creation and economic diversity in the Hunter region of New South Wales by connecting innovators and entrepreneurs to the community, coaching, customers, and capital. As the Manager of the I2N, Siobhan is responsible for the delivery of programs for students, staff, alumni, and community that cover everything from foundational enterprise principles for emerging entrepreneurs through to acceleration programs and incubation services for start-ups and scale-ups.

Siobhan holds a Master of Business Administration (Honours) majoring in Innovation and Entrepreneurship from the University of Newcastle. She has extensive experience in building and delivering business development programs, having worked for not-for-profit Renew Newcastle to support creative arts entrepreneurs develop and grow their product and market potential, and now in her role at I2N, supporting both soft-tech and deep-tech start-ups. The I2N has assisted more than 70 teams to accelerate and incubate. Over the last four years, pre-accelerator and accelerator program participants have gone on to incorporate 16 new companies, which to date have raised more than $6 m in the capital and have created and sustained 31 new jobs. A further 320 programs and events have been delivered to emerging entrepreneurs, pre-start-ups, start-ups, and SMEs, which have attracted more than 7,200 participants, critically driving a networked innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem in the Hunter region.