

Preface



“This tradition starts here and now...”

Historians can spend happy evenings debating the relative importance of propitious circumstances and charismatic leadership. The organisers of the 1799 coup that ultimately made Napoléon Bonaparte First Consul originally approached General Joubert (who was killed in action at the Battle of Novi), then General Moreau (who declined) and even General MacDonald, improbably raised in Sancerre as the son of an impoverished Hebridean Jacobite. How might modern European history have unfurled had France lived through *l’empire MacDonald* in the early nineteenth century?

Counterfactuals need not always form stark contrasts with actuality, the launch of *Innovation & Impact* being a case in point. The ground had recently been prepared with the enlightened policy of the Polish government to send 500 of the country’s most promising scientists to leading innovation clusters in the United States and the United Kingdom in mid-2015 to study the systems and institutions that make technology diffusion successful. These future leaders also experienced at first hand that “something in the air”, the shared rules and conventions that distinguish a true cluster from mere co-location, to borrow Alfred Marshall’s analysis, with conspicuously creative outcomes, as we can now appreciate.

Towards the end of their time in Cambridge, the cohort of scientists working with us gave much thought to how to ensure an enduring – and practical – legacy for the Top 500 programme. Soon the concept of a journal for practitioners gathered momentum as the chosen vehicle for further dissemination of innovation in Poland. “Fortune favours the prepared mind,” to borrow Louis Pasteur’s phrase. Preparation included long-term adaptation of Polish higher education and an international consensus of the importance of innovation for the welfare of society as much as the specifics of the American and British training programmes.

But even these auspicious conditions required leadership to turn concept into reality. Envisioning the framework, finding a publisher and coaxing contributions from busy practitioners within (or nearly within) given deadlines are all underappreciated crafts. The work of the editorial team of *Innovation & Impact* has been an inspiration as they exercised patience and ingenuity to produce first the digital and now the tangible collection of ideas and case studies to emerge from those visionary conversations overseas. Their calm self-belief reminded me uncannily of one of the grandees of the Cambridge Cluster in the 1990s who, dismissing criticism of the then-novel idea of an annual conference on innovation and enterprise as “something unprecedented”, replied that every tradition begins somewhere and this one “starts here and now”.

When the right people collide with an idea whose time has arrived, originality assumes the aura of inevitability (hence the limitations on convincing counterfactual thinking), but launching a new venture is nevertheless always daunting. Professor Howard Stevenson of Harvard Business School defined entrepreneurship as “the pursuit of opportunity beyond resources controlled”; using that yardstick, the editors have already demonstrated considerable entrepreneurial flair. May their spirit prove contagious across Poland and beyond.

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