

Science lessons



The strategies being successfully adopted by Babraham Research Campus in Cambridge and Alderley Park in Cheshire hold lessons not just for the life sciences industry – but for all UK scaleup ecosystems.

Recognise that growth is not continuous

The particular challenges of how to scale up a business in the life sciences sector has been recognised by the Life Sciences Industrial Strategy, which has set a strategic goal of creating, in the next ten years, four UK companies with a market capitalisation of at least £20bn.

Their growth comes in jumps and leaps rather than in a neat linear fashion. The inflection points are decidedly non-trivial; to make the next step in its scaling path, a life sciences company will require fresh finance, larger facilities, additional clinical expertise and an infusion of new commercial talent – all at the same time. “In this industry, there are always ‘big gulp’ moments for the board,” says Andy Richards, biotech entrepreneur and investor and a board member of Babraham Research Campus, “but in a truly vibrant cluster, these discontinuities can be smoothed.”

Understand your tenants – and help curate their growth

One aspect that marks out these campuses is that they regularly review progress with their companies and this is linked to a suite of business growth services, primarily through an extensive events programme that can cover finance, talent acquisition, market access, organisational design and leadership.

“Most science parks focus on incubation and early-stage businesses,” says Anne Dornan, Head of Innovation at Manchester Science Partnerships (MSP). “Our model at MSP is to support businesses at every stage of the lifecycle, creating a very diverse and ever expanding portfolio. We know our companies’ business plans, their growth objectives, and target milestones, when they are going through a major fund-raise or recruitment round, or are about to land a big contract. Working closely with our customers in a proactive way ensures they can access the right support resources at the right time to help meet their growth ambitions.”

“It is critical to have a 360-view of a company,” says Ned Wakeman, Director of Alderley Park Accelerator, powered by BioCity. “You have to understand the

company’s business when it arrives here. You need to help them understand with whom they might they collaborate, or sell their services. Each business has to know why their presence on the Park will be additive for them, the community and the ecosystem – and how they can better grow and develop their business by being here. Our job is to help attract, create, and scale those businesses here through direct support on a one-on-one level with domain and business experts, to structured programmes (early-stage and scaleup), boot camps, commercial workshops, on-site conferences, as well as providing access or introductions to the site’s scientific services.”

Babraham offers access to consultancy, specialist equipment, skills training and leadership capacity-building through its Accelerate@Babraham programme.

Be flexible about property

Facilities can be a real challenge for life sciences companies. Their growth requires constant changes to their infrastructure requirements, in terms of laboratories and offices. They may require access to specialist scientific facilities for short periods. It’s an ever-changing jigsaw puzzle. So flexibility is built into terms, license agreements and access to specialist scientific services and facilities; “we want to ensure that companies can move easily and seamlessly through our portfolio, with security of access to specialist services, so that we are always enabling their growth,” says Anne Dornan.

Alderley Park’s infrastructure allows companies to start as a hot desk or single lab bench and to expand as their business develops. There are now 65 companies on site, the number having grown from 16 in 2013, now with over 1,200 employees compared to 47 in the first year.

The 59 life science companies on the Babraham campus have access to the science laboratories and offices on short-term tenancies, with the opportunity to grow into larger space as the company evolves, and specialist scientific facilities.

Build a community that shares things

Both Babraham and Alderley Park work hard on community building. The co-location of companies can be hugely influential and additive but relationships between businesses have to be built. “Science parks can be sterile places,” observes Andy Richards. “You have to be very pro-active to get people to fit in and work together.”

“Building the buildings is easy,” says Anne Dornan. “It’s building a successful and sustainable business community that can be hard.”

So collaboration is built into the DNA of the campuses. “Collaboration is essential: it takes 100 skill-sets to develop a drug – but a biotech could have only three people,” Wakeman cites an oft-repeated saying, “and it is important to catalyse relationships both locally and nationally.”

Be a talent magnet

For Babraham, the proximity of Cambridge and its dense network of expertise is vital. It is an environment, Andy Richards notes, in which world-class specialists will have their portfolios of projects. “For example, you can secure a top clinical development person for one day per week, if they are excited by your project.”

Develop leaders

Access to finance may be a major challenge for companies but, says Anne Dornan, “the main thing that many need is talent.” Especially for companies with an academic and scientific background, this can often mean help with building an experienced business management team, and recruitment of key board members.

Provide mentors

The provision of mentors is “absolutely critical,” says Ned Wakeman. Soon after it started operations, Alderley Park established an Expert Mentor Network to build on the links with senior leaders within the industry who wanted to contribute to the Park’s future success. The Expert Mentor Network is based on a philosophy of giving something back. “This is not a route for people to seek out investments, non-executive directorships or consultancy assignments,” says Wakeman. “It is only for people who are interested in supporting the companies.”

Attract investors

More than £500m has been invested into Babraham Research Campus companies through equity and corporate deals since January 2015. From 2017, campus companies have raised an additional £308m, the majority of which originated from outside the UK. “There has been a noticeable shift in the quality of investors,” says Andy Richards. “They are more global, more patient and bigger ticket.”

Build strong corporate relationships

Babraham and Alderley Park represent two sides of the same corporate coin. The pharmaceuticals giant AstraZeneca departed from Alderley Park as part of its decision to relocate its global headquarters to Cambridge.

So Alderley Park is the site of numerous spin-outs from AstraZeneca, often started by experienced executives who did not want to move to Cambridge. Strong commercial relationships have been maintained with the pharma giant – according to Ned Wakeman, at least half a dozen companies on site have done commercial deals with AstraZeneca.

At Cambridge, Babraham is feeling the benefits of AstraZeneca’s arrival. “It is the marriage of growth within the environs of a global life sciences company,” says Andy Richards. One impact is on the breadth of available talent: geographical proximity means that AstraZeneca executives can take up board positions on local companies as well as bring their own networks of international talent into the ecosystem.

Measure the impact

“The success of MSP’s portfolio of companies – in terms of revenue and asset growth, employees, investment in R&D, numbers of new products taken to market and levels of internationalisation – are all vital economic performance indicators,” says Anne Dornan. “Our shareholders and wider stakeholders want to see economic impact.”

Multiple stakeholders are a source of strength for these ecosystems

A “triple helix” partnership of public, private and academic shareholders has always been “a key defining feature” of MSP. This combination includes universities, city and county councils, the NHS, and private sector property company Bruntwood. MSP has retained this broad partnership structure since its formation in 1984.

Babraham Research Campus is jointly owned by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (UKRI) and the Babraham Institute, which has the status of a postgraduate department within the University of Cambridge. “Ownership is important as it does drive motivation,” says Andy Richards. “For the Babraham Campus the motivation is the long term health of the bioscience cluster and the companies within it.”