

Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project

Lessons Learnt Report #2

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Recipient Name	EnergyLab Australia Pty. Limited
Primary Contact Name	James Tilbury
Contact Email	james@energylab.org.au
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Executive Summary

EnergyLab's Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project comprises the implementation of four programs to help accelerate startups' progress in deploying renewable energy and complementary technologies:

1. Pre-Acceleration Program
2. Acceleration Program
3. Scaleup Program
4. Women in Clean Energy Fellowship.

During this reporting period (late August to mid-October 2020), the progress we made in designing and delivering each of these programs gave rise to numerous lessons learnt as summarised below.

Pre-Acceleration Program

Lesson learnt 1: A sizeable 'pre-acceleration market' exists

A strong level of interest in early-stage startup support programs exists in Australia, making it important for organisations like ours to continue offering dedicated support to emerging founders.

Lesson learnt 2: Engaging early-stage founders can be a challenge

With early-stage founders often managing other jobs and commitments alongside developing their startup idea, it's important to explore program design/delivery options to optimise founder engagement.

Lesson learnt 3: Business coaching is highly valued by founders, even at early stages

Our Pre-Acceleration Program participants derived significant value from their individual coaching sessions with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur, suggesting that such coaching opportunities are worthwhile including in early-stage startup support programs going forward.

Acceleration Program

Lesson learnt 4: Mentoring remains a critical - and highly valued - part of the support provided through our Acceleration Program

With mentoring relationships consistently cited by startups as one of the most valuable parts of our Acceleration Program, maximising the involvement of mentors in future programs seems a worthwhile endeavour.

Lesson learnt 5: The more hands-on, the better

Opportunities to apply learnings ‘in real life’ (and real time) are highly valued by startups, making them an important inclusion in future startup support programs also.

Lesson learnt 6: Founders are keen to learn capital raising skills

The strong positive reception our sessions on pitch theory, practice and feedback received during the Acceleration Program’s Capital Raising Week suggests that pitch training is an important part of building founders’ fundraising capability.

Lesson learnt 7: Business/strategy coaching remains a critical part of supporting startups, especially in the age of COVID-19

Founders have continued to derive significant value from their ongoing coaching relationships with EnergyLab’s Chief Entrepreneur, CEO and Acceleration Program Manager, reinforcing the important place such coaching components have in startup support programs (particularly in the post-pandemic period as startups navigate the associated economic downturn and uncertainty).

Scaleup Program

Lesson learnt 8: Engaging later-stage founders (/CEOs) can also be a challenge

Obtaining (and maintaining) engagement from time-pressed later-stage founders and CEOs is sometimes difficult, requiring additional effort and program delivery considerations to be made such that participants’ busy schedules can be best accommodated.

Lesson learnt 9: Later-stage founders value opportunities to connect and learn from one another

Our Scaleup Program cohort of later-stage founders place a high value on networking amongst themselves, making the inclusion of opportunities for cohort members to connect and learn from one another important for the success of such programs.

Lesson learnt 10: Partner networks hold significant potential to help maximise industry engagement

Program partners often bring extensive industry networks to the table, which can be a valuable resource for maximising program exposure and industry engagement.

Lesson learnt 11: Professionalism in program delivery is key to success

Exacting standards of professionalism and consistency are appreciated by later-stage founders participating in our Scaleup Program, making the maintenance of these standards a high priority for this program and its future iterations.

Women in Clean Energy Fellowship (WICEF)

Lesson learnt 12: Interpersonal connections are essential to building aspiring women entrepreneurs' confidence to start a startup

WICEF participants found the program's networking component to be one of the most meaningful, suggesting that the more time and effort put towards establishing connections with fellow cohort members and mentors, the better.

Lesson learnt 13: Aspiring entrepreneurs value the knowledge imparted - and structure imposed - through a fellowship framework

For aspiring entrepreneurs, learning the 'basics' of entrepreneurship and having some time dedicated to developing their startup idea and skills on a regular basis provide an important foundation for building their entrepreneurial capacity and confidence.

Lesson learnt 14: Aspiring entrepreneurs engage strongly with content about ideation, validation and pitching

Fellowship content related to idea generation, customer validation and pitching was very well-received, making it important that future programs aim to include as much focus on these areas as possible.

Lesson learnt 15: Energy sector experience and self-drive to start a company raise the chances of aspiring entrepreneurs pursuing a startup idea post-fellowship

Recruiting participants with prior energy sector experience and a demonstrated drive to start a cleantech company seems to increase the chance that they will pursue their startup idea after the fellowship ends, and also provides opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and knowledge transfer among the cohort.

Lesson learnt 16: The WICEF 'fellowship formula' seems to be working

With 77% of respondents to our post-WICEF survey indicating an interest in starting a cleantech startup in the next five years, it seems that such capacity-building programs for aspiring entrepreneurs hold substantive potential to help build the pipeline of women cleantech startup founders.

We have also encountered a range of impacts, challenges and opportunities due to COVID-19. From the heightened importance of online communication to the opening up of opportunities for mentoring relationships across (previously separated) geographic regions, the pandemic has taught us a great deal about operating in a virtual environment and how our startup support programs can continue delivering optimal value to founders during times of such uncertainty.

We look forward to implementing these lessons learnt during our completion of this project and design of programs for 2021, and hope that they prove useful for other organisations providing similar programs of support throughout the cleantech startup ecosystem.

Introduction

This Lessons Learnt Report (LLR) is the second LLR produced for EnergyLab's Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project. The Project, undertaken with support from ARENA's Advancing Renewables Program, involves the delivery of four programs to help accelerate startups' progress in deploying renewable energy and complementary technologies:

1. Pre-Acceleration Program
2. Acceleration Program
3. Scaleup Program
4. Women in Clean Energy Fellowship.

This report covers project progress and lessons learnt during a period of approximately two months, from late August to mid-October 2020.

Project Overview

The Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project was designed to facilitate the (re)launch of a series of startup programs run by EnergyLab, Australia's largest cleantech startup accelerator and network dedicated to the clean energy transition. In (re)launching these programs, the Project aims to accelerate the progress of entrepreneurs deploying renewable energy and complementary technologies as efficiently & effectively as possible. In particular, it seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Increase the level of expertise, skills and capacity in the renewable energy technology sector by supporting and mentoring startups
2. Improve the technology readiness and commercial readiness of renewable energy technology by identifying pathways to commercialisation
3. Increase the value delivered by renewable energy by bringing together multiple value streams to help develop technologies, businesses and markets to reduce cost and increase renewable energy uptake.

The four programs (re)launched as part of this Project are outlined overleaf.

Program	Objective	No. startups participating	Duration
Pre-Acceleration Program	Help entrepreneurs with an idea for an energy startup to test its commercial viability and secure launching support	16	3 months
Acceleration Program	Help the most promising energy startups launch a product into the market, secure their first customers and raise a seed round	6	9 months
Scaleup Program	Connect the best later-stage startups from around the world with potential partners, provide them with mentorship from successful energy entrepreneurs, and help them raise a series A round	13	6 months (extended from an initial duration of 3 months due to COVID-19)
Women in Clean Energy Fellowship	Equip women interested in energy entrepreneurship with the skills, knowledge and support they need to start a company	43 participants in total during 2020 (31 in first cohort and 12 in second cohort)	3 months

Table 1: Overview of startup support programs

Pre-Acceleration Program

Program Details

EnergyLab's Pre-Acceleration Program aims to help early-stage entrepreneurs test the commercial viability of their idea and secure support to launch. Delivered over three months, the program has three main focus areas:

1. Refine the idea
2. Obtain customer validation
3. Communicate the idea.

Though originally designed to include three full-day intensive in-person sessions across its three-month duration, the Pre-Acceleration Program has been delivered entirely online due to the emergence of COVID-19. As outlined in the *COVID-19 Impacts* section below, this transition proved a fairly smooth one, with all program components (workshops, business coaching/strategy sessions and virtual membership) able to be executed within the virtual environment.

Program Progress

Pre-Acceleration Program progress since the Project commenced in December 2019 has included:

- Program launched with a new curriculum
- Recruitment complete with 16 startups selected to participate and accepting a spot in the program
- 5 fortnightly workshops held with program participants (only final workshop/graduation session remaining as of 10 October)
- Business coaching/strategy sessions with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur delivered for each program participant.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 1: A sizeable 'pre-acceleration market' exists

Applications for the Pre-Acceleration Program showed that a strong level of interest exists in programs of this nature among emerging cleantech entrepreneurs in Australia, and that they consider the support offered by such programs a valuable part of building their company.

Relevance to program objective¹

Entrepreneurs with an idea for an energy startup want help, and are eager to access it through early-stage startup support programs.

Implication/s for future projects

The sizeable demand for our Pre-Acceleration Program indicates that providing support for early-stage startups is critical to developing the 'pipeline' of cleantech startups developing & deploying renewable technology. As such, the inclusion of dedicated support offerings for early-stage startups seems important for future projects of this nature and, at EnergyLab, we will ensure our future offerings include support options tailored for early-stage founders.

Lesson learnt 2: Engaging early-stage founders can be a challenge

With many early-stage founders still maintaining day jobs (and other commitments) during the program, obtaining and maintaining their full engagement in workshops and other program activities can be challenging, particularly where these activities are scheduled during business hours.

Relevance to program objective¹

Where founders found themselves unable to engage fully during the program for professional or personal reasons, the help we were able to provide in refining, validating and communicating their startup idea would likely have been less effective than if they had been able to engage fully.

Implication/s for future projects

For future programs aimed at supporting early-stage founders, it may be worth exploring alternative program design/scheduling options to optimise founder engagement (e.g. holding workshops outside of business hours or providing recorded online content for participants to consume at a time convenient to them). At EnergyLab, we will integrate these considerations into our design of future support offerings for early-stage startups.

Lesson learnt 3: Business coaching is highly valued by founders, even at early stages

Feedback from program participants indicated that their business coaching/strategy sessions with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur were particularly highly valued.

Relevance to program objective¹

Business/strategy coaching was a key part of the help provided to startups through the Pre-Acceleration Program.

¹ Pre-Acceleration Program objective: Help entrepreneurs with an idea for an energy startup to test its commercial viability and secure launching support.

Implication/s for future projects

We'd suggest that future support programs for early-stage founders include some one-to-one business coaching with a successful entrepreneur, and are committed to continuing to offer such coaching opportunities to early-stage startups in our EnergyLab programs and community where possible.

Acceleration Program

Program Details

The Acceleration Program aims to help the most promising energy startups launch a product into the market, secure their first customers and raise a seed round. Delivered over three months to a cohort spanning three cities (Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney), the program is structured around three modules:

1. Build
2. Sell
3. Grow.

Originally designed to include four one-week in-person intensives, program delivery shifted online after the first intensive week due to COVID-19. Similarly to the Pre-Acceleration Program (and as detailed in the *COVID-19 Impacts* section below), this shift proved a fairly smooth one, with all formal program components (masterclasses, mentoring, business coaching/strategy sessions, and legal/accounting assistance) able to be delivered in the virtual environment.

Program Progress

Acceleration Program progress since the Project commenced in December 2019 has included:

- Program relaunched with a new structure
- Recruitment complete with 6 startups selected to participate and accepting a spot in the program
- Orientation Week held in Sydney and Melbourne
- Sales Week held virtually
- Capital Raising Week held virtually
- Graduation Week planning underway
- Speed networking with mentors organised (multiple sessions)
- Business coaching/strategy sessions with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur conducted for each participating startup.
- Ongoing cohort calls and monthly check-ins conducted with participants.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 4: Mentoring remains a critical - and highly valued - part of the support provided through our Acceleration Program

Feedback from Acceleration Program participants has highlighted the ongoing value they derive from the mentoring relationships we're able to facilitate through the program. Also, startups indicate that they prefer accessing mentors via scheduled & dedicated one-to-one conversations with mentors (as opposed to more 'free-flowing' networking events), at as frequent intervals as possible.

Relevance to program objective²

Providing access to mentors is one of the primary ways we're able to help the energy startups participating in our Acceleration Program.

Implication/s for future projects

As mentioned in a previous Lessons Learnt Report for this Project, we'd suggest that future cleantech startup acceleration programs continue (and, where possible, maximise) the involvement of mentors. At EnergyLab, we will be looking at tactics to optimise mentor involvement in our programs for 2021 - these may include:

- Surveying prospective mentors to learn what types of clean energy startups they are most interested in offering their expertise/experience to. This would allow us to identify additional (and more targeted) pairings of mentors to founders, and increase the chance of those pairings being as productive as possible.
- Increasing the involvement of mentors in program activities (e.g. as workshop facilitators).
- Maximising the number of speed networking sessions run with mentors for each Acceleration Program cohort.

Lesson learnt 5: The more hands-on, the better

Opportunities to immediately apply learnings and make tangible progress, as well as opportunities to receive practical, individual feedback from experts are highly valued by founders (indeed, their requests to us have often been to make more of these opportunities available).

² Acceleration Program objective: Help the most promising energy startups launch a product into the market, secure their first customers and raise a seed round.

Relevance to program objective²

Founder feedback has reinforced for us the importance of including as big a hands-on component in our programs as possible, as this seems to be one of the ways we're able to most efficiently and effectively help develop their startup.

Implication/s for future projects

For future startup support programs designed to help established startups grow, maximising the opportunity for hands-on learning and individual engagement with experts seems an important consideration (and one we'll be bearing in mind for the design of our 2021 Acceleration Program curriculum).

Lesson learnt 6: Founders are keen to learn capital raising skills

Sessions covering pitch theory, practice and feedback during Capital Raising Week were particularly well-received by Acceleration Program participants.

Relevance to program objective²

Building founders' pitching skills has been a key aspect of the help we've been able to provide Acceleration Program participants in terms of building their capital raising capability.

Implication/s for future projects

While already a standard feature of many accelerators, we'd suggest that creators of future startup support programs that aim (at least in part) to help founders raise capital at some point prioritise opportunities for entrepreneurs to learn and practise pitching before graduating. At EnergyLab, we will ensure these opportunities are provided to the maximum extent feasible in our program designs for 2021 and beyond.

Lesson learnt 7: Business/strategy coaching remains a critical part of supporting startups, especially in the age of COVID-19

During this reporting period, founders have continued to derive significant value from their individual business/strategy sessions with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur, CEO and Acceleration Program Manager. These sessions became all the more important for program participants once COVID-19 hit, providing valued support as they sought to respond quickly to the challenges and opportunities posed by the pandemic.

Relevance to program objective²

Similarly to our comments surrounding mentoring above, providing business/strategy coaching to founders is one of the primary ways we're able to help the energy startups participating in our Acceleration Program.

Implication/s for future projects

Given the value founders have typically derived from having an ongoing coaching relationship with the EnergyLab team over the course of the Acceleration Program, we'd suggest that some form of ongoing business coaching be included in future startup support programs of this nature (and will continue to include it in our support offerings for cleantech founders going forward).

Scaleup Program

Program Details

The Scaleup Program aims to connect the best later-stage startups from around the world with potential partners, provide them with mentorship from successful energy entrepreneurs, and help them raise a series A round. Delivered over three months, the program is structured around three one-week sprints:

1. Kickoff Week (31 August - 4 September 2020)
2. Investor Week (12-16 October 2020)
3. Graduation Week (15-19 February 2021).

Although these one-week sprints were initially intended to be run in-person in Sydney and Melbourne, the Scaleup program has been delivered predominantly online to date due to COVID-19. Similarly to the programs already mentioned (and as discussed in the *COVID-19 Impacts* section below), the adaptation of this program to the virtual environment has proved feasible, enabling the delivery of workshops, scaleup/partner introductions, networking, public events and legal/accounting support to go ahead.

Program Progress

Scaleup Program progress since the Project commenced in December 2019 has included:

- Recruitment complete with 13 scaleups selected to participate and accepting a spot in the program
- Kickoff Week delivered
- Investor Week preparations underway
- Ongoing scaleup check-ins conducted
- Peer-to-peer learning opportunities facilitated for the cohort
- Office hours made available to scaleups with experts in fields including legal considerations and communications.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 8: Engaging later-stage founders (/CEOs) can also be a challenge

In a similar way (but for slightly different reasons) to our challenges engaging some early-stage founders during the Pre-Acceleration Program, we've also found it challenging at times to obtain and maintain engagement with the scaleups' founders and/or CEOs. This is primarily due to the founders/CEOs typically being very busy in their roles (Scaleup Program implications aside, a good thing overall!).

Relevance to program objective³

To successfully facilitate connections and mentoring for the scaleups, it has been necessary for the EnergyLab team to work around the founders'/CEOs' busy schedules and, at times, has required the team to expend some additional liaison/coordination effort beyond that initially planned for.

Implication/s for future projects

Our experience with the Scaleup Program so far suggests that liaising/engaging with later-stage founders/CEOs can be more time- and effort-intensive than anticipated. As such, we'd suggest that creators of later-stage startup support programs in future ensure this is taken into consideration when designing their program, both in terms of the delivery team's capacity and identification of opportunities to streamline/simplify logistics where possible (we will be incorporating these considerations into future iterations of our Scaleup Program also).

Lesson learnt 9: Later-stage founders value opportunities to connect and learn from one another

Scaleup Program participants have displayed notable enthusiasm for networking with other founders in the cohort, finding it a useful way to scope (and realise) opportunities for learning and business growth.

Relevance to program objective³

This learning potentially highlights that an extension to our Scaleup Program objective may be warranted, to reflect the importance (and impact) of connecting the best later-stage startups from around the world with *each other*, as well as with potential partners, mentors and investors.

Implication/s for future projects

The scaleups' enthusiasm for engaging with their fellow cohort members suggests that future programs designed to help later-stage entrepreneurs would do well to maximise founder networking and knowledge sharing opportunities wherever possible. For our Scaleup Program, we've already added some additional peer-to-peer learning sessions to the 2020 curriculum on topics including utility partnerships, capital raising and marketing, and expect such sessions will remain a feature of the program in years to come.

³ Scaleup Program objective: Connect the best later-stage startups ('scaleups') from around the world with potential partners, provide them with mentorship from successful energy entrepreneurs, and help them raise a series A round.

Lesson learnt 10: Partner networks hold significant potential to help maximise industry engagement

Along with their financial and/or in-kind contributions, Scaleup Program partner organisations bring extensive networks in the clean energy sector and associated industries to their support of the program.

Relevance to program objective³

Finding ways to realise the engagement-building potential of our partners' networks has helped us to effectively connect later-stage startups with potential partners.

Implication/s for future projects

In light of this lesson learnt, we'd encourage creators of later-stage startup support programs to create and realise opportunities to leverage partner networks where appropriate. At EnergyLab, we will be cognisant of maximising these opportunities in future iterations of our Scaleup Program; for example, by encouraging program partners to invite colleagues to events (e.g. the Scaleup Program VIP Launch Preview Event).

Lesson learnt 11: Professionalism in program delivery is key to success

Feedback received from the scaleups so far illustrates the substantial value they place on having high standards of professionalism and consistency maintained throughout the program (e.g. regular and consistent distribution of program communications, reliable follow-up and follow-through on commitments, and provision of program schedule details with plenty of notice).

Relevance to program objective³

Maintaining these high standards of professionalism and consistency has helped ensure scaleups stay engaged to date, ultimately assisting us to achieve our overall objective for the program.

Implication/s for future projects

Our experience suggests that it's worth prioritising professionalism when designing and delivering support programs for later-stage startups to help ensure optimal participant (and partner) engagement. In a manner consistent with the approach we take to all EnergyLab programs, we will strive to ensure high standards of professionalism and consistency are maintained throughout future iterations of the Scaleup Program and associated initiatives.

Women in Clean Energy Fellowship

Program Details

The Women in Clean Energy Fellowship (WICEF) aims to equip women interested in energy entrepreneurship with the skills, knowledge and support they need to start a company (with a view to, ultimately, building the pipeline of women cleantech startup founders). Delivered over three months to participant groups in three cities (Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney), the program run as part of this Project was EnergyLab's second WICEF iteration, based on our pilot WICEF program run in Melbourne in 2019.

Like the Acceleration Program, WICEF began in-person for most participants and then shifted online once COVID-19 hit. As for the other programs (and as discussed in the *COVID-19 Impacts* section below), this shift proved feasible from a program delivery perspective, with all workshops, presentations and mentor conversations able to proceed in the virtual environment.

Following the completion of this second WICEF iteration (our first cohort for 2020), we then also ran the program for a second cohort (this subsequent program was run entirely virtually).

Program Progress

WICEF progress since the Project commenced in December 2019 has included:

- Program launched with a revised curriculum (based on 2019 WICEF pilot)
- Recruitment and selection complete
- 43 participants selected and accepted a spot in the program (31 in our first 2020 cohort, and 12 in our second 2020 cohort)
- Program complete for the first cohort, and underway for the second cohort (weekly workshops over three months).

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 12: Interpersonal connections are essential to building aspiring women entrepreneurs' confidence to start a startup

Feedback from our WICEF participants strongly reflects how impactful they found the program's networking component. For a number of participants, connecting with fellow cohort members and mentors was nominated as one of the most meaningful aspects of their WICEF experience.

Relevance to program objective⁴

Facilitating connections between WICEF participants (and with mentors in the clean energy sector) was one of the primary ways we were able to help build a support base for women interested in energy entrepreneurship through the program.

Implication/s for future projects

Our experience highlights the importance of dedicating ample time and effort to network-building in future programs aimed at supporting/empowering/inspiring aspiring women entrepreneurs. For future iterations of EnergyLab's WICEF program, we will endeavour to maximise opportunities for participants to forge connections within the cohort and the energy/entrepreneurship sectors, both during the fellowship and once they become alumni.

Lesson learnt 13: Aspiring entrepreneurs value the knowledge imparted - and structure imposed - through a fellowship framework

With most WICEF participants at the stage of considering cleantech entrepreneurship as a potential future endeavour (as opposed to something they are already pursuing, or have pursued in the past), they derived significant value from learning the 'basics' of entrepreneurship and the clean energy sector.

Participants also valued the structure/discipline of the fellowship's weekly 2-hour workshops, ensuring that time was dedicated each week to developing their entrepreneurship potential (and, eventually, cleantech startup ideas).

Relevance to program objective⁴

This lesson reflects the WICEF program's importance (and effectiveness) in equipping women interested in clean energy entrepreneurship with the skills and knowledge they need to start a company.

Implication/s for future projects

For creators of future startup support programs tailored to aspiring entrepreneurs, we'd caution against underestimating the usefulness and impact of time spent on 'the basics'. While workshops on foundational entrepreneurship skills and sector overviews might seem somewhat rudimentary to those more experienced in these fields, they seem to be an important part of equipping budding entrepreneurs with the skills, knowledge and support they need to start a company.

At EnergyLab, we will bear this in mind for future iterations of the WICEF program, as well as the design of other programs that aim to help participants make the transition from aspiring entrepreneurs to cleantech founders.

⁴ WICEF objective: Equip women interested in energy entrepreneurship with the skills, knowledge and support they need to start a company.

Lesson learnt 14: Aspiring entrepreneurs engage strongly with content about ideation, validation and pitching

Feedback on our WICEF program content indicates that participants highly valued (and that we could potentially have dedicated more time and focus to) content related to idea generation, customer validation and pitching.

Relevance to program objective⁴

While this feedback reflects that the program's content about ideation, validation and pitching was well-received and successfully conveyed skills and knowledge participants will need to start a company, it also suggests that an opportunity might exist to increase the fellowship's impact by increasing the time/focus spent on these topics.

Implication/s for future projects

While content about ideation, validation and pitching is already a standard inclusion in many support programs for early/aspiring founders, our experience reiterates the importance of dedicating sufficient time to these topics in program schedules. For future iterations of our WICEF program, we will design the program to allow as much time/focus on this content as possible and, where needed, look at options to deliver content outside the official schedule.

Lesson learnt 15: Energy sector experience and self-drive to start a company raise the chances of aspiring entrepreneurs pursuing a startup idea post-fellowship

WICEF participants who have prior energy sector experience and are clearly self-motivated to start a business of their own seem to get the most out of their fellowship experience (in terms of capacity built and progress made), making them relatively likely to go on to pursue their cleantech startup idea once the program ends.

Relevance to program objective⁴

Where participants had prior experience in the energy sector and/or entrepreneurship, our role in achieving the program's objective tended towards supplementing/complementing the skills and knowledge they already had, while still providing sufficient support for other cohort members who may not have had the same level of experience. (Indeed, in some cases we were able to draw upon the knowledge and skills of more experienced participants to help those newer to the clean energy and entrepreneurship fields.)

Implication/s for future projects

While we believe that programs to support aspiring entrepreneurs will ideally be made available to the broadest possible cohort of participants, it may be worth considering how such programs can be designed to provide the most value (and maximise the chance of progress/success) for participants with varying degrees of prior knowledge and experience. This may apply to the approach taken to recruitment also; for example, it may be worth targeting the recruitment of at least some participants with prior experience to provide opportunities for peer-to-peer learning opportunities such as those arising during the WICEF program delivered as part of this project. At EnergyLab, we will incorporate both these considerations into future program design and delivery to ensure the greatest possible chance of success for all participants.

Lesson learnt 16: The WICEF ‘fellowship formula’ seems to be working

77% of respondents to our post-WICEF survey (for our first 2020 cohort) indicated that they would be interested in starting a cleantech startup in the next five years (Figure 1), highlighting the fellowship’s success in helping to build the pipeline of women cleantech startup founders.

Relevance to program objective⁴

These survey results reflect that, for the majority of WICEF participants, the fellowship was designed and delivered in a way that met its objective to equip women interested in energy entrepreneurship with the skills, knowledge and support they need to start a company.

Implication/s for future projects

These results suggest that the continued development and rollout of programs to equip/empower/inspire aspiring women cleantech entrepreneurs is well worthwhile. We are committed to running further WICEF programs in the years ahead, and will seek to integrate the learnings discussed above to ensure future programs are as impactful as possible.

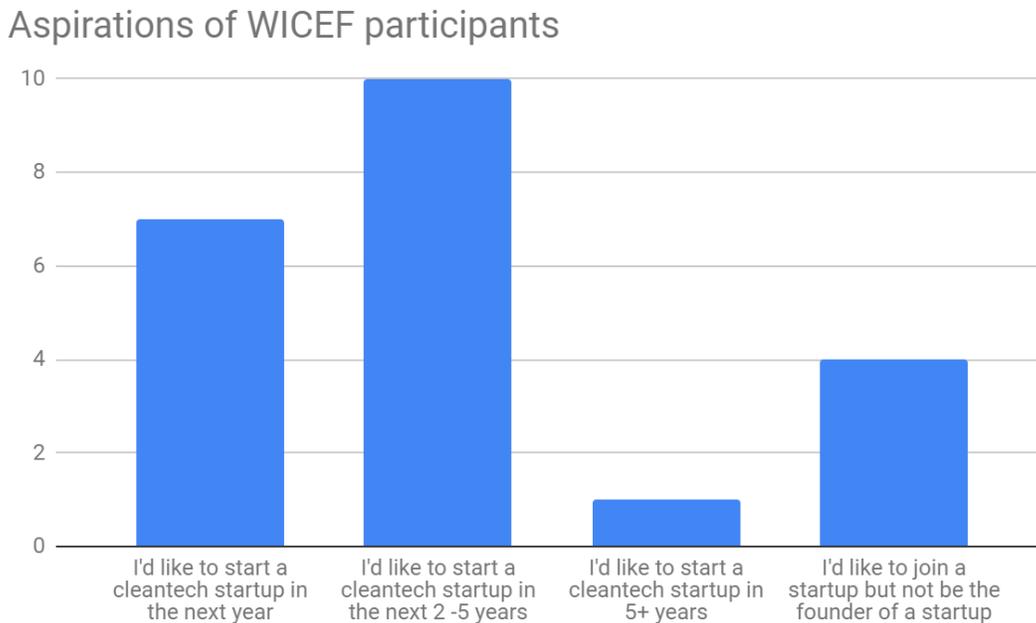


Figure 1: Post-WICEF survey results

COVID-19 Impacts

As discussed for each program above, the pandemic's main impact on the Project was a shift to online program delivery. This transition was a relatively smooth one overall, with all formal program content able to be delivered in the virtual environment.

While transitioning to EnergyLab's new 'virtual' mode' did present some unforeseen implications and challenges, in many cases it also created opportunities to add new value to our programs. A range of these implications, challenges and opportunities are outlined below:

- The removal of face-to-face contact from our programs made our maintenance of a 'cohort effect' for each program increasingly dependent on participants' engagement with us - and each other - via online platforms. Day-to-day, this has taken the form of participants contributing to group discussions on our internal communication platform (Slack), attending weekly virtual Member Meetups, and initiating Slack/email conversations with other program participants as areas of common interest are identified.
 - While these online methods have been largely successful at building and maintaining a sense of connectedness and cohesion among our program cohorts, it has also been acknowledged that informal/incidental communication is much less prominent in the virtual setting, making it somewhat more difficult (and less convenient) to form relationships quickly with fellow participants. To help address this, we have been encouraging participants to meet informally (via video conference or, where possible, in person) outside the formal program structure to build rapport, and will consider the best ways of providing for informal/incidental communication among participants in future program designs.
- As mentioned in a previous Lessons Learnt Report for this Project, delivering the Acceleration Program online allowed participants access to mentors from right across the country, as opposed to only those in their geographic region (as is typically the case when the program is delivered in-person).
- Given the business challenges posed by COVID-19 and the associated economic downturn, individual business coaching/strategy sessions with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur, CEO and Acceleration Program Manager took on a heightened significance as startups (particularly those in the Acceleration Program) navigated the emerging (and unpredictable) uncertainties, challenges and opportunities.
- The shift to online delivery made our programs more accessible for a number of participants, such as some of our Women in Clean Energy Fellowship cohort. For these participants, the virtual setting made it easier to manage competing work and family priorities, and removed the need to commute long distances to participate.

Conclusion

Since commencing our delivery of the Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project in December 2019, EnergyLab has designed and delivered (to varying degrees of completion) four programs to help accelerate startups' progress in deploying renewable energy and complementary technologies. In doing so, we have collected numerous learnings related to our achievement of each program's objectives, ranging from the relative value of specific program components to how to best engage with participants at various stages of their startup journey.

Like many organisations, we've also learnt a lot in the context of COVID-19, mainly related to our transition to delivering all programs in the virtual environment.

As we go about finishing this project and finalising our program designs for 2021, we look forward to implementing the learnings that have arisen to date, and hope that they provide useful insight for other organisations who provide startup support programs of a similar nature.