

Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project

Lessons Learnt Report #3

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Executive Summary

This Lessons Learnt Report covers the final four months of EnergyLab's Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project (mid-October 2020 to February 2021). In this time, we completed the delivery of four programs to support founders in their cleantech entrepreneurship endeavours:

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

An overview of the lessons learned through delivering each of these programs to completion is presented below.

Pre-Acceleration Program

Lesson learnt 1: Business establishment and strategy are top of mind for early-stage founders

Entrepreneurs at an early stage of their startup journey place a high value on being able to access support for making early business establishment/development decisions (e.g. through business coaching).

Lesson learnt 2: The program covered foundational topics well, and could have given more time to customer validation

Given the significant time typically required for founders to understand and conduct customer validation, future programs may benefit from having more time dedicated to this topic.

Lesson learnt 3: Founders with some initial validation already seemed to get the most out of the program

Participants with some prior customer validation for their idea tended to make more (and faster) progress through the program, suggesting extension opportunities (or extra support for those without initial validation already completed) may be worthwhile considering for future programs.

Lesson learnt 4: Founders place a high value on intra-cohort connections

Pre-Acceleration Program participants placed a high value on meeting and forming working relationships with others in their cohort, indicating that the provision of networking opportunities is a key enabler of success for early-stage startup support programs.

Acceleration Program

Lesson learnt 5: Making connections within - and beyond - the cohort was a highlight

In a manner similar to Lesson learnt 4, providing ample opportunities for cohort members to form connections with each other - as well as with potential customers, partners, investors and mentors - was a key part of the value our program provided its participants.

Lesson learnt 6: Speed networking delivers significant value (on multiple levels)

Speed networking (in face-to-face and virtual forms) proved a valuable way for founders to expand their networks and hone their pitching skills during the program.

Lesson learnt 7: A six-month duration may have been a slightly better fit for the program

While the Acceleration Program's nine-month duration worked well, a six-month duration would likely have been sufficient to achieve the program's objectives (and may have enabled some time and resources savings from a program management perspective).

Lesson learnt 8: Maintaining founder engagement post-graduation is a challenge

The decline in alumni engagement levels over time has highlighted the importance of ensuring all program objectives are achieved while founders remain engaged during official program timeframes.

Scaleup Program

Lesson learnt 9: Establishing commercialisation partnerships is more a marathon than sprint

There are significant time and effort requirements associated with facilitating partnership conversations between startups and potential partners that need to be factored into program design and delivery.

Lesson learnt 10: Facilitated conversations are useful even where startups have already established connections with utility partners

Through our experience with the Scaleup Program, we've learned that a connection with/into a partner organisation doesn't need to be a startup's first for it to have value; each conversation holds the potential to expand founders' networks and partnership prospects further.

Lesson learnt 11: Late-stage startups place a high value on peer-to-peer learning

Scaleup Program participants remained enthusiastic about peer-to-peer learning opportunities during the final four months of the program, highlighting these opportunities as important components to take forward into future iterations of the program.

Women in Clean Energy Fellowship

Lesson learnt 12: Networking remains a critical component for building female entrepreneurs' confidence and capacity

Similarly to our other programs, networking opportunities were a source of significant value for Women in Clean Energy Fellowship participants (and will be maintained as a key component of the program in future).

Lesson learnt 13: Content on founder resilience resonates with some and not others

WICEF participants reported varying levels of receptiveness to the program's session on founder resilience, suggesting it may be worth considering including it as an optional component in future.

Lesson learnt 14: Evening sessions work well for aspiring entrepreneurs

For programs designed to support aspiring entrepreneurs, scheduling sessions after the standard work day seems an effective way of accommodating participants' other commitments (e.g. work and family responsibilities).

Lesson learnt 15: The WICEF model has been a continued success

89% of respondents to the WICEF post-graduation survey for our second 2020 cohort are interested in starting a cleantech startup in the next five years, indicating that the program has continued to successfully equip, support and inspire aspiring female cleantech entrepreneurs.

Introduction

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

This report covers project progress and lessons learnt during a period of approximately four months, from mid-October 2020 to the Project's completion in late February 2021.

Project overview

The Clean Energy Startup Support Programs Project has seen EnergyLab, Australia's largest cleantech startup accelerator and network dedicated to the clean energy transition, (re)launch four support programs for cleantech startups:

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

In (re)launching these programs, the Project aimed to accelerate the progress of entrepreneurs deploying renewable energy and complementary technologies as efficiently and effectively as possible. Desired outcomes for the Project were to:

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.

Pre-Acceleration Program

Program Details

The Pre-Acceleration Program was (re)designed to help entrepreneurs with an idea for an energy startup to test its commercial viability and secure launching support.

The program ran from July to October 2020 with 16 startups participating. Due to COVID-19, the program was delivered entirely online for the first time.

Program Progress

The Pre-Acceleration Program has now been delivered to completion. This included:

- Program redesign and launch
- Recruitment and participant selection
- Online workshop delivery (seven workshops)
- Business coaching/strategy sessions for participants with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 1: Business establishment and strategy are top of mind for early-stage founders

Participants rated the Pre-Acceleration Program's business coaching/strategy component relatively highly compared to its capital raising component (pitching skills etc.). To us, this suggests that early-stage founders derive the most value from program components that are focussed on initial business model establishment/development considerations; that is, those that are most directly relevant to where they are in their entrepreneurial journey at the time of participating in the program.

Relevance to program objective¹

Supporting founders to reach early-stage business establishment/development decisions was an important part of helping participants to create companies capable of testing (and achieving) their ideas' commercial viability and securing launching support through this program.

Implication/s for future projects

Where possible, we'd recommend that future programs aimed at supporting startups to test - and gain support to launch - their idea maximise the support provided for founders in making their early business establishment/development decisions. For future early-stage support programs run by EnergyLab, we will retain (and, where possible, optimise) provision of this support via business coaching sessions for founders with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur.

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

Lesson learnt 2: The program covered foundational topics well, and could have given more time to customer validation

The time and focus given to ‘entrepreneurship foundations’ topics like value propositions, market sizing and legal considerations for starting a startup seemed well-matched to the founders’ level of knowledge/experience and associated needs. The time and focus given to the more advanced (and involved) topic of customer validation, however, could have been greater; this would have given participants greater opportunity to thoroughly test the commercial viability of their idea.

Relevance to program objective¹

More time given to customer validation in the program curriculum may have enhanced our ability to help participants test the commercial viability of their idea and secure launching support.

Implication/s for future projects

We’d suggest that designers of future support programs for early-stage founders include as much time as possible (at least three weeks) for the customer validation component of their program (in reviewing our programs for 2021, we will also be looking at optimising the time spent on this topic).

Lesson learnt 3: Founders with some initial validation already seemed to get the most out of the program

Program participants who had already progressed through some initial validation (e.g. customer discovery) tended to get the most out of the program in terms of developing their idea, testing its commercial viability and progressing towards the attainment of launching support.

Relevance to program objective¹

Our ability to help entrepreneurs with a startup idea through the Pre-Acceleration Program was enhanced when participants had undertaken some initial customer validation prior to joining the cohort.

Implication/s for future projects

While we think it is important for early-stage support programs to be available to founders at any stage of idea development, it may be worth considering how future programs could be designed to provide maximum value to participants both with and without initial customer validation. For instance, extension/fast-track opportunities could be incorporated for founders who have already obtained some customer engagement and validation (or extra support provided to those who haven’t). At EnergyLab, we will incorporate these considerations into our review and design of early-stage startup support programs for 2021.

Lesson learnt 4: Founders place a high value on intra-cohort connections

Post-graduation feedback indicated that Pre-Acceleration Program participants would have valued more opportunities to form and consolidate connections with their fellow cohort members alongside the program's content delivery.

Relevance to program objective¹

This learning suggests that it may be worth amending/expanding our Pre-Acceleration program objective to reflect the importance of facilitating connections between participating founders (as well as helping them to test the commercial viability of their ideas and secure launching support).

Implication/s for future projects

To deliver maximum possible value for participating founders, we'd suggest organisers of early-stage startup support programs ensure their program schedules allow for ample opportunities for founders to meet and form collaborative working relationships. In EnergyLab's case, we consider this lesson applicable to all our programs and will seek to maximise founder connection/collaboration opportunities where we can in 2021.

Acceleration Program

Program Details

The Acceleration Program was delivered to help the most promising energy startups launch a product into the market, secure their first customers and raise a seed round.

The program ran from February to October 2020 with six startups participating. The program's four one-week intensives were delivered via a mix of in-person and online methods due to COVID-19.

Program Progress

The Acceleration Program has now been delivered to completion. This included:

- Program redesign and launch
- Recruitment and participant selection
- Orientation Week held in-person in Sydney and Melbourne
- Sales Week, Capital Raising Week and Graduation Week held online
- Speed networking with mentors held in-person and online
- Business coaching/strategy sessions with EnergyLab's Chief Entrepreneur
- Cohort calls and monthly check-ins.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 5: Making connections within - and beyond - the cohort was a highlight

Connections with cohort members, program alumni, mentors, potential investors and the broader EnergyLab community were highly valued by Acceleration Program participants. Throughout the program, founders were highly engaged in opportunities to form these connections, including speed networking, EnergyLab member meetups and alumni presentations/discussions.

Relevance to program objective²

Connecting founders to others in the cleantech startup ecosystem was a key enabler of our ability to help them finalise and launch products, secure initial customers and prepare to raise capital. (In a similar way to the Pre-Acceleration Program, this also suggests that expanding the program objective to explicitly include a focus on facilitating connections may be warranted.)

Implication/s for future projects

Feedback from our 2020 Acceleration Program cohort suggests that, in future programs, it would be worth providing frequent opportunities for founders to connect with a broad range of cleantech startup stakeholders. We'll be looking to heed this implication in the delivery of

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.

upcoming EnergyLab programs by leveraging our networks of mentors, investors and alumni to provide future cohorts with the maximum number and breadth of networking opportunities we can.

Lesson learnt 6: Speed networking delivers significant value (on multiple levels)

Following on from Lesson learnt 5, graduating founders commonly referenced the expansion of their network as the most valuable part of their Acceleration Program experience. This was, to a large extent, facilitated through the speed networking sessions run throughout the program; opportunities for founders to meet at least six new contacts each month (and practise their networking and 'elevator pitching' skills).

Relevance to program objective²

The Acceleration Program's speed networking component proved an effective tactic for achieving the program's objective; in particular, for helping startups to secure initial customers and build their pitching skillset ahead of raising a seed round.

Implication/s for future projects

Should creators of future startup support programs be exploring ways to facilitate networking/connections for participants, we'd be quick to suggest a speed networking approach (either in-person or online, as program design and COVID-19 restrictions allow). Given its success as part of the EnergyLab Acceleration Program in 2020, we'll be looking to continue incorporating speed networking into programs of our own in future as well.

Lesson learnt 7: A six-month duration may have been a slightly better fit for the program

Participants seemed to value the program's extended (relative to previous programs) nine-month duration, finding it matched their startup development trajectories fairly well. However, from a program delivery perspective, with some program redesign most of the impact could probably have been achieved within a six-month timeframe, making it slightly more time/resource effective.

Relevance to program objective²

On reflection, it seems that the program objective could probably have been achieved within a slightly shorter timeframe with some modifications to the program's design and scheduling.

Implication/s for future projects

For accelerator organisations looking to design similar startup support programs with the greatest possible degree of time/resource efficiency, we'd suggest considering a program duration of no more than six months at first (and will be using this as the basis for the design of our next Acceleration Program round in 2021).

Lesson learnt 8: Maintaining founder engagement post-graduation is a challenge

Founder engagement with EnergyLab following the Acceleration Program graduation was fairly strong to begin with, with multiple founders continuing to participate in EnergyLab virtual events and contribute to our online communication channels. Over time, however, this engagement has been difficult to maintain, likely as a result of factors including the Christmas/New Year break, COVID-19, founders' additional commitments and their departure from the structured acceleration program environment.

Relevance to program objective²

While continued founder engagement would be desirable from the perspectives of community development and ongoing capacity-building, the decline in engagement post-graduation has not impacted our ability to achieve the objective over the course of the program (during which, founders remained highly engaged).

Implication/s for future projects

Given our experience of declining engagement levels following graduation, we'd encourage future startup support program organisers to ensure all components required to achieve the program's objective/s are delivered during its official timeframe (i.e. to avoid relying on ongoing alumni engagement as a way of achieving the program objective/s where possible). While EnergyLab's programs are already typically designed in this way, we will remain mindful of the need to achieve all program objectives within the official timeframes committed to by participating founders at the outset.

Scaleup Program

Program Details

The Scaleup Program was delivered 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.

The program ran from August 2020 to February 2021 with 13 late-stage clean energy startups participating. All whole-of-cohort sessions were delivered online due to COVID-19, with some additional in-person activities held (in Sydney) as restrictions allowed.

Program Progress

The Scaleup Program has now been delivered to completion. This included:

- Program redesign and launch
- Recruitment and participant selection
- Kickoff Week, Investor Week and Graduation Module (including showcase events) delivered online
- Knowledge and skills development workshops
- Peer-to-peer learning sessions
- Check-ins and partner updates
- Office hours with experts including legal, accounting and communications professionals.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 9: Establishing commercialisation partnerships is more a marathon than sprint

In executing our 'matchmaking' function (i.e. connecting Scaleup Program participants with utility organisations with a view to helping them form commercialisation partnerships), we have learned that:

- There are significant lead times involved in establishing successful startup/utility partnerships. This may be attributed to factors including founders' full schedules/workloads and the time needed for conversations/commitments to progress through utilities' organisational structure and processes.
- The 'matchmaking' role provides substantial value in terms of initiating conversations between founders and utility representatives that would otherwise be unlikely to occur, and fast-tracking the 'discovery' process on both sides (as matchmaker, we're already familiar with the startups' offering and utilities' needs/challenges, so can offer insight and suggestions upfront to help progress the conversation more quickly).
- We will need to continue engaging with the Scaleup Program graduates now they have become alumni to maximise the chance of their discussions with utilities evolving into formalised partnerships.

Relevance to program objective³

In executing our ‘matchmaking’ role, EnergyLab has achieved the program’s objective to connect the best later-stage startups from around the world with potential partners. Having said that, this learning suggests that, for the impact of our ‘matchmaking’ to be maximised, we will need to dedicate ongoing effort to continuing to engage with the startups and utilities involved.

Implication/s for future projects

Having now delivered a partnerships-focussed startup support program for the first time, we would advise future creators of similar programs to be mindful of the substantial time and effort required to prepare for, execute and follow up on startup/utility partnership conversations (and will be bearing this in mind for the design and delivery of future iterations of the EnergyLab Scaleup Program).

Lesson learnt 10: Facilitated conversations are useful even where startups have already established connections with utility partners

A couple of the startups in the Scaleup Program had already established working relationships with one of our utility partners which, at first glance, may make our facilitation of further conversations with this organisation seem somewhat redundant. As it turned out, however, these conversations still provided significant value; in both cases, they allowed the startups to broaden their networks within the organisation and progress their partnership endeavours.

Relevance to program objective³

This learning indicates that the Scaleup Program was able to deliver value to founders in terms of connections with potential partners, even if the connections provided to utility organisations were not their first.

Implication/s for future projects

For future startup support programs with a ‘matchmaking’ element, we’d encourage program coordinators to conduct the maximum number of facilitated startup/utility conversations possible, even where startups have connected with a certain utility previously. Given the breadth and scale of most utility organisations, our experience suggests that the more conversations (and contacts) each startup can have with them the better; a mindset we’ll be applying to future iterations of the EnergyLab Scaleup Program.

Lesson learnt 11: Late-stage startups place a high value on peer-to-peer learning

In our previous Lessons Learnt Report, we highlighted the (somewhat unexpected) enthusiasm displayed by Scaleup Program participants for peer-to-peer learning opportunities and the program alterations/additions we’d made in response. The last four months have delivered further evidence of the high value late-stage founders place on these opportunities, with the

³ Scaleup Program objective: 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.

additional sessions (covering topics like utility partnerships, strategic investment, capital-raising, and business to business marketing) all well-attended.

Relevance to program objective³

In a manner similar to the Pre-Acceleration and Acceleration Program objectives, this learning reiterates that an expansion of the Scaleup Program objective to include connecting late-stage startup founders to *each other* (as well as to potential partners and mentors) may be warranted.

Implication/s for future projects

Our Scaleup Program experience suggests that, for support programs targeting late-stage startups in future, it would be worth including regular opportunities for peer-to-peer networking and learning in the program schedule. We will be including such opportunities in future iterations of the Scaleup Program, and will also open them up to alumni participation. This will allow graduates of the program to maintain their connection to each other, as well as enabling 'new' cohorts to learn from the experience and expertise of those who have completed the program before them.

Women in Clean Energy Fellowship

Program Details

The Women in Clean Energy Fellowship (WICEF) was run to equip women interested in energy entrepreneurship with the skills, knowledge and support they need to start a company.

We delivered the program to two cohorts during 2020; the first ran from March to May, and the second from September to December. 43 women completed the program in total, participating in a predominantly virtual manner due to COVID-19.

Program Progress

WICEF delivery for our two 2020 cohorts has been completed. This involved (for each cohort):

- Program (re)launch
- Recruitment and selection
- Weekly workshops.

For the second 2020 cohort, speed networking and mentoring with program alumni were also incorporated into the program.

Lessons Learnt

Lesson learnt 12: Networking remains a critical component for building female entrepreneurs' confidence and capacity

Networking and interpersonal connections were frequently cited as high-value program components by WICEF participants. Their feedback indicated that more time could potentially be given to the program's networking component (and that this would be of particular value for those looking to meet a co-founder during the program).

Relevance to program objective⁴

This learning indicates that providing networking opportunities is one of the key ways we're able to equip women interested in energy entrepreneurship with the support they need to start a company.

Implication/s for future projects

For future programs that, like WICEF, aim to equip and inspire women to pursue entrepreneurship, we'd recommend including as many opportunities as possible for networking within (and, where practical, beyond) the cohort. This is a key consideration for us at EnergyLab also as we iterate on the WICEF model; we added a new speed networking component to the

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

program for our second 2020 cohort, and will stay on the lookout for additional ways to offer networking opportunities in future.

Lesson learnt 13: Content on founder resilience resonates with some and not others

Our WICEF participants' receptiveness to the content delivered on founder resilience has been notably mixed. While some participants valued the content very highly, others found it less relevant.

Relevance to program objective⁴

For some aspiring female entrepreneurs, building knowledge and skills in the more personal 'resilience realm' is an important part of WICEF's role in preparing them for clean energy entrepreneurship. For others, however, it seems this content was not a significant contributor to the program achieving its objective.

Implication/s for future projects

To optimise the effectiveness of WICEF and other future programs aimed at developing aspiring female entrepreneurs, it may be worth considering ways to accommodate (likely variable) levels of receptiveness to content on founder resilience. For instance, the content could be made optional; available to those who find it valuable and able to be skipped for those who don't consider it a necessary addition to their journey to entrepreneurship (at their current stage, at least).

Lesson learnt 14: Evening sessions work well for aspiring entrepreneurs

Scheduling our WICEF workshops in the evening (after the standard work day had ended) seemed to work well for participants, many of whom were needing to maintain other commitments (e.g. work and family commitments) during the day.

Relevance to program objective⁴

Scheduling WICEF sessions to match participants' availability helped to maximise engagement levels, thus ensuring the program was as effective as possible in achieving its objective for each member.

Implication/s for future projects

Where possible, we would suggest that future programs aimed at engaging aspiring entrepreneurs build their schedules around the likely availability of their participants (i.e. early morning or evening to minimise the chance of clashes with other commitments). Given our positive experience with this scheduling approach so far, we intend to continue running sessions in the evening for future iterations of the WICEF program.

Lesson learnt 15: The WICEF model has been a continued success

Feedback from our second 2020 cohort indicates that the WICEF model continues to produce results in terms of equipping and supporting female entrepreneurs to start a cleantech startup. 89% of post-program survey respondents indicated they are interested in starting a cleantech startup in the next five years (Figure 1), and the program received a Net Promoter Score of 100.

Relevance to program objective⁴

These results indicate that the WICEF program has succeeded in achieving its objective of equipping women interested in energy entrepreneurship with the skills, knowledge and support they need to start a company.

Implication/s for future projects

As mentioned in a previous Lessons Learnt Report for this Project, this learning reiterates that delivering programs to equip, support and inspire aspiring female entrepreneurs is a well-worthwhile endeavour. At EnergyLab, we have been very pleased to see WICEF’s positive impact in terms of enabling and encouraging more female cleantech entrepreneurs, and look forward to increasing this impact through delivering the program to future cohorts.

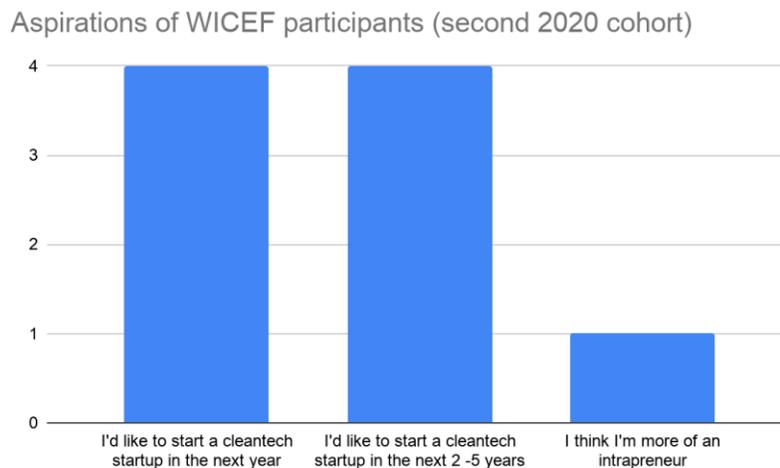


Figure 1: Post-program survey results

COVID-19 Impacts

Between October 2020 and February 2021, the Project's four startup support programs continued to be delivered primarily online due to circumstances surrounding COVID-19. Program components delivered virtually during this period included:

- Presentations and workshops
- Business coaching
- Speed networking
- Peer-to-peer learning sessions
- Showcase events.

High standards of quality were able to be maintained while delivering these components online, enabling all program objectives to be achieved. In the case of the speed networking run as part of the Acceleration Program, the virtual environment offered some additional value through the opportunity for participants to practise pitching their idea in an environment with somewhat more formal/defined time and structure constraints than those typical of in-person interactions.

Where COVID-19 restrictions allowed, some in-person components were reintroduced during this period (e.g. optional face-to-face events for Scaleup Program participants in Sydney). The positive reception these in-person events received - as well as feedback from other program participants - suggests that complementing online delivery with in-person components is worthwhile (as pandemic conditions allow). As such, although we anticipate EnergyLab's startup support programs will remain online for the foreseeable future, we will endeavour to reintroduce in-person elements where practical while maintaining the quality and consistency of elements delivered online.

Finally, COVID-19 has meant that, in some cases, the amount/nature/speed of progress made by startups during this Project is likely to have been slightly different to what was initially expected. In general, however, startups across each program achieved positive outcomes despite the COVID-19 challenges encountered (and, importantly, are likely to be more resilient as a result).

Conclusion

During the four months covered by this Lessons Learnt report, we completed the delivery of four cleantech startup support programs: our Pre-Acceleration Program, Acceleration Program, Scaleup Program and Women in Clean Energy Fellowship. Collectively, these programs have supported founders at various stages of the startup lifecycle to start (or prepare to start) and develop companies focussed on the development and commercialisation of clean energy technologies.

Our experiences during this Project have provided a variety of learning opportunities for the EnergyLab team in areas including program design and delivery, founder engagement and community development. Progressing each program in the midst of constantly changing COVID-19 conditions has also proved instructive, allowing us to hone our skills in online delivery and learn how best to combine virtual and in-person components (where possible).

Having produced this Lessons Learnt report, we look forward to its insights finding application in future startup support programs run by EnergyLab - as well as those run by other accelerator organisations - with a view to supporting the development of an active and robust cleantech startup ecosystem.