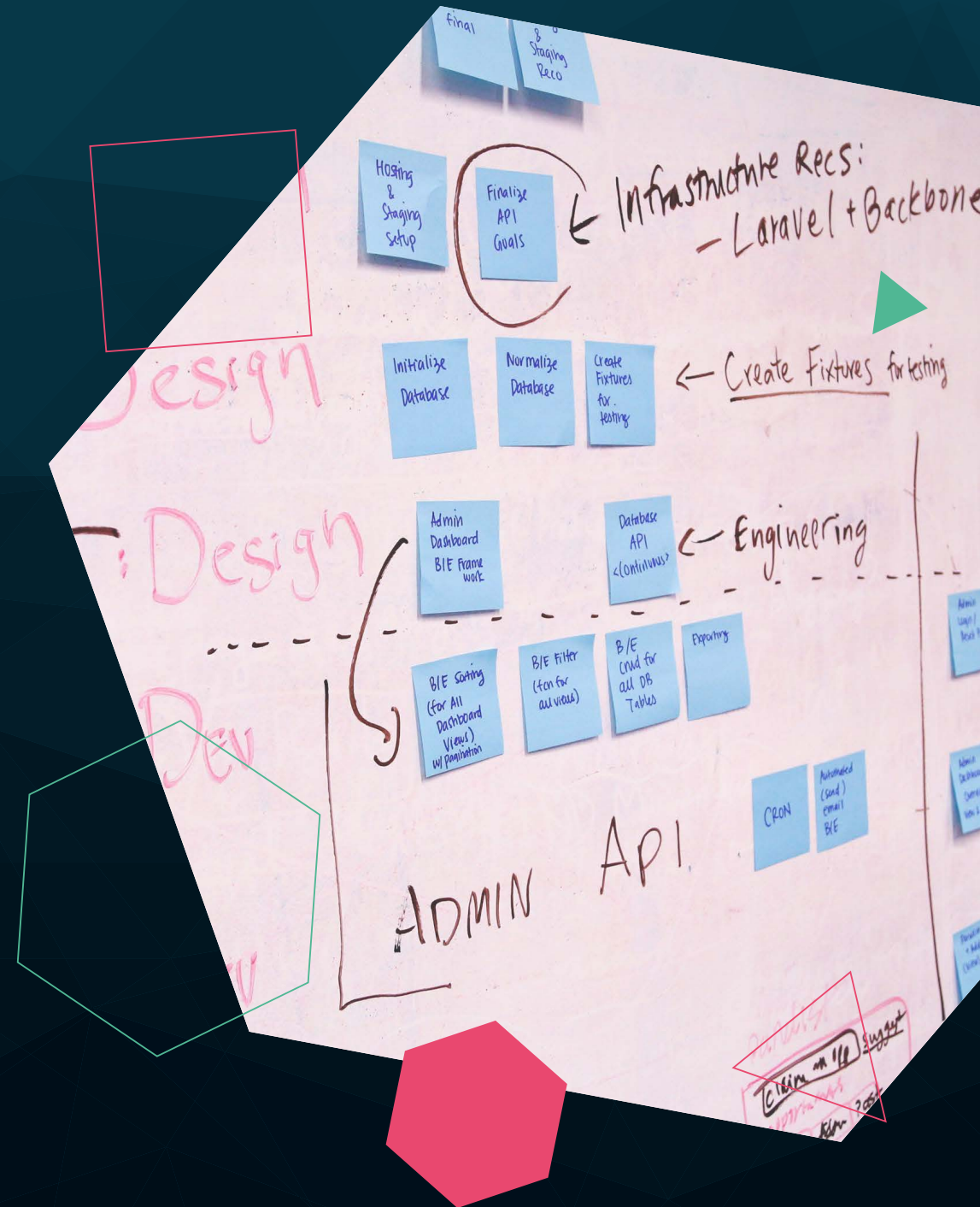


Aspect

A social scientist
in a start-up world

2021





Venture

Zinc Venture Builder and
Academy Programmes



Social science discipline

Multiple



Aspect Members

Zinc



Sector

Healthcare,
Information Technology
& Communications,
Leisure & Tourism



Route-to-market

Social enterprises
and start-ups

Researchers are transferring their skills for the benefit of a wide range of new ventures, supporting mission-driven start-ups to achieve large scale impact

Zinc exists to build and scale a brand-new way to solve the most important societal problems faced by the developed world. Since its launch in 2017, their Venture Builder programmes have been developing a unique ecosystem of diverse talent across many sectors, disciplines and countries – mobilising people around a common mission and building scalable solutions to social problems.



The Zinc in-house R&D team supports founders to create new ventures from scratch, as well as working with ventures in the later stages of their journey. From helping to scope the problem and using theoretical frameworks to facilitate user research and testing, researchers at Zinc are transferring their skills to the fast-paced, creative, applied context of new ventures. Ella Moonan-Howard, Gerontology Scientist, and Dr Clarisse Aichelburg, Behavioural Scientist, are Research Fellows within the team, who work closely with founders to ensure there is evidence-based research behind their products and services. Both are at different stages of their academic journey and saw Zinc as an opportunity to try a career path in a more applied research-rich environment, where they could apply their skills and make a difference.

Mini Profile: Ella

Ella started at Zinc on a short-term fellowship, which was then extended and led to her suspending her PhD to continue in the role, as she was enjoying the experience so much. She's helped to build and launch new ventures and seen founders start and finish their programmes, flying the nest into the start-up world. She is now working on a part-time basis at Zinc whilst she finishes her PhD.

Mini Profile: Clarisse

Clarisse has worked in both academia and in a start-up environment and saw how research and social science could inform products from her experience working in industry. She discovered Zinc through a former colleague and the timing felt right to work in a role which would enable her to have the best of both worlds. Having worked on Zinc's later life venture-builder programme, she is now leading a new programme of work at Zinc on taboo health issues, funded by The Wellcome Trust.

Both Ella and Clarisse work with ventures to develop a deep understanding of the problems they want to tackle, rather than jumping too quickly to a solution. They support founders to explore user needs, applying Zinc's user-centric design principles, to discover the root causes behind important challenges/problems, and to come up with fresh solutions. They've also helped new ventures through:

- Bringing in experts to deliver workshops and inspire ventures to look at different areas, rather than look at problems in siloed ways.
- Helping to test and pilot ideas for products and conducting qualitative research.
- Training founders on how to conduct user research and build their confidence in speaking to the public about science and evidence.



The impact

- The Research Fellows have helped to organise a range of research activities, including co-creation workshops, focus groups, and surveys (e.g. helping founders to design questions used to collate user feedback in an easy, structured format). This accelerated founders'

“

I hadn't thought of business and research going so hand-in-hand, but I can see now how invaluable research is as you start a business.

”

“

Having not had any exposure to behavioural science before I've particularly valued the introduction to behaviour change techniques, and research to better understand user behaviour.

”

- learning and ensured their user research activities were robust, ethical, and maximally valuable in generating relevant insights.
- Zinc's research-led approach means that the products and services created by Zinc ventures are person-centred and grounded in a thorough understanding of user needs.
- Applying social science evidence and methodologies has enabled founders to really understand what people want, and to put the person and their environment into context, which brings depth to the social problem the venture is striving to solve.

“

We've always considered scientific research to be very important, but through Zinc we have been able to use research to help us do our market analysis faster and better, and to help us design the right solution.

”

Academic v start-up worlds: key learnings



Both Ella and Clarisse agree that the pace is incredibly different. Ella says *“In academia, research can move slowly whilst in the start-up world everything is super-fast and iterative, from the development of new ideas to user testing and product development. Working on live projects and adjusting to constant adaption as the project moves has been very different to the linear, structured processes of academia. It’s made me shift my mindset, from seeing a problem as a challenge to viewing it as part of the dynamism and development of a start-up.”*

Each has learnt how highly collaborative the start-up culture is and see this as very different to the academic world. Academic research can often feel like working individually in a very specific area, whilst a start-up requires you to draw on a network of support. Founders are not afraid to ask for help which makes it very exciting and a totally different culture to their experience in academia.

According to Rachel Carey, Chief Scientist at Zinc “New start-ups provide fertile territory for exciting social science research. Our approach to R&D at Zinc is about maximising the extent to which existing research is drawn

upon, and new research is produced and shared, by new ventures. Ella and Clarisse, drawing on their sociology and psychology backgrounds, have embraced the opportunities this creates – both to generate impact through new products and services, and to advance scientific knowledge.”

Finally, what both Ella and Clarisse have admired is how social impact drives Zinc’s mission-driven start-ups forward. The ventures bring together people based on their passions, a powerful tool to drive social impact, particularly when people bring different backgrounds and skills. Clarisse says:

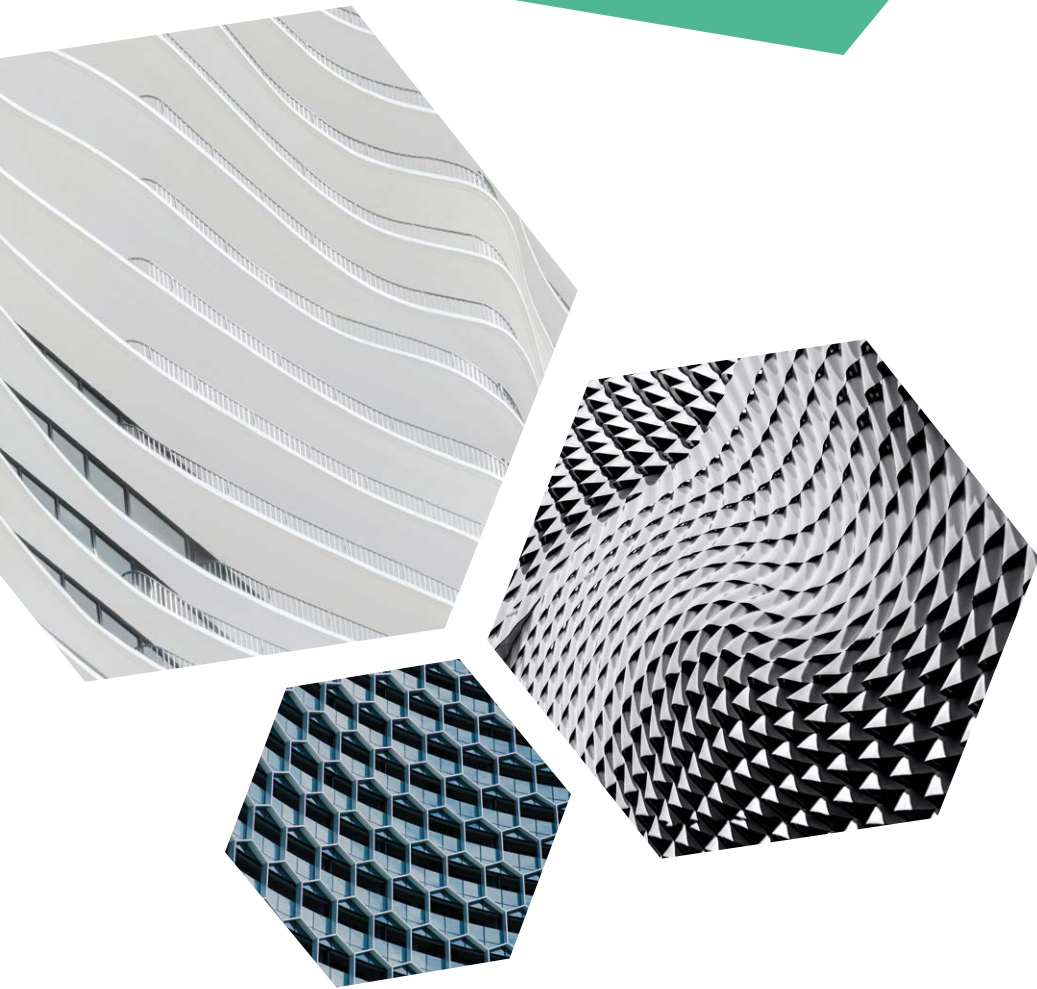
“**Often in academia, a project is completed and then you move onto solving the next research challenge, but start-ups continue with their passions to drive impact from their idea and scale upwards.**”

They offer some key advice:

- Embrace working with people from outside your discipline or sector, and getting experience in other sectors and settings – see the value in being a ‘boundary-spanner’
- If you’re thinking of moving into research in the start-up world, you will often need to become more of a ‘generalist’ and move away from your specific research expertise/interest
- Think about the values of a researcher and what good research is – regardless of the context in which it takes place
- Think about applying creative research methods and how to conduct research differently, particularly thinking about co-design approaches that bring value and engagement to participants
- Conducting research in a new environment encourages you to get back to principles of why research is important.
- Try research and innovation roles outside of academia and see whether the environment suits you – start-ups aren’t for everyone! Gain experience working with start-ups (e.g. through advisory roles) before making the jump, if you’re not sure what to expect.
- Being a researcher turned entrepreneur is possible – the skills are transferable, you just need to learn a new language, develop new networks, and immerse yourself in a new context.



What's next



Ella's focus is on completing her PhD, which she hopes to finish in summer 2021. After her PhD, she wants to continue in a role which enables her to keep pushing the agenda for innovation in later life and improving older people's health and wellbeing. She wants to continue working in research and innovation and is completely open to the wide range of industries and opportunities which will enable her to do this. Clarisse, in her role at Zinc, is now leading a programme of work focused on tackling health-related taboos, supported by a Public Engagement Award from the Wellcome Trust.

Zinc is about to enter a new growth phase – scaling up its venture-building activities and launching new programmes. Its programmes will focus on four missions: improving mental and emotional health; unlocking opportunities in areas hard hit by automation and globalisation; improving the quality of later life; and reducing the harm people do to the environment. Over this next phase, Zinc will be scaling up its R&D activities in parallel (more information about this [here](#)). The R&D team is growing, and there will be a range of opportunities for researchers to get involved.

Background Information



Ella Moonan-Howard



Role

R&D Fellow, Zinc



Degree

BSc Sociology, MSc Gerontology

Ella is a PhD student at the University of Southampton's Centre for Research on Ageing, a member of the Centre for Population Change and the ESRC's South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. Her PhD research focuses on transitions into solo living, subjective well-being and social networks in later life. She has mixed methods background and is a big promoter of the use of collaborative and creative methodologies. She holds wider research interests in the role of housing and the built environment to foster positive social connections, and the promotion of the life course approach to gerontology



Contact

ellamh@zinc.vc

Background Information



Clarisse Aichelburg



Role

Research Fellow, Zinc



Degree

PhD Cognitive Neuroscience

Clarisse is an Honorary Research Fellow at UCL's Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, a former Chief Scientist at hiMoment and Consultant at London Cognition. Clarisse has a PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience, started working with industry during her PhD and continues to take behavioural science into the real world.



Contact

clarisse@zinc.vc

Case Study

Aspect

Transforming Society Through
Social Science Innovation

Aspect (A Social sciences Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences research.

Supported by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund, Aspect members sit at the epicentre of discovery, imagination and progress in the social sciences. We draw together pioneering academics with innovative industry leaders to tackle the most complex societal challenges of our time.



Aspect is funded by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund