# The researcher who wants to take the stress out of professional development
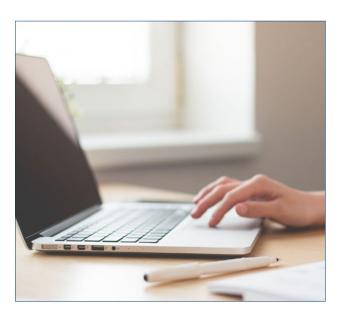


*The idea for a better way to help students develop fulfilling careers transformed Dr John Miles from Shakespeare researcher to education technology entrepreneur.*

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"People often feel a precipice approaching", says John Miles, the Shakespeare researcher-turned founder and Chief Technology Officer of skills and career development platform, **Inkpath**. "I've seen countless students and researchers practically meltdown when approaching key milestones in their lives."

Inkpath recommends activities and training opportunities relevant to users' desired career paths. By tracking users' achievements, it builds a profile for life people can take from school to university and into employment. "It is like a 'Fitbit for your career'", John explains. "It takes the stress out of career planning, by breaking it down into achievable weekly goals based on the opportunities around you."

The platform also gives universities a focal point to integrate existing student personal development programmes, set goals, monitor cohort performance and collect feedback. "Inkpath gives development professionals the data they need to understand what's working and what's not. Its analytics are much more comprehensive than traditional measures such as bums on seats and feedback forms", John asserts.

A little more than two years after the company spun out from The University of Oxford, more than 25 institutions already use Inkpath, including Oxford, University College London and The University of Canberra. John and his team are also working with several employers to embed the app in their early-stage graduate programmes. "Universities' scale and the complexity of their systems make them a challenging place for a start-up to break ground. However, by starting with higher education institutions, we have built a dynamic and growing student user base that is now attracting employers", he says. "The more companies that join, the more student users we'll attract, and the better Inkpath will become. It's a virtuous circle."

The idea for Inkpath came to John during his first week at Oxford. "I had an unusual role as I was both the Humanities Training Officer and a Research Associate at Wadham College. Balancing the two positions was tricky, and I was keen to be as efficient as possible", he recalls. "At the time, there were several systems to manage student and researcher development, and a lot of feedback was collected manually with pen and paper. I've always had an interest in technology and coding so I thought I'd try to make an app that could bring these elements together."

John developed a prototype, which proved popular with humanities students. However, he says the 'game-changer' moment came in 2015 when he entered and won funding from the University of Oxford's IT innovation challenge. "I received expert support to turn my prototype into a proof of concept I was able to share with my contacts in the wider student development community. Through these conversations it became clear there was a lot of interest in the idea", he says.

The proof of concept also impressed Dr Mark Mann, Humanities and Social Sciences Innovation Lead at Oxford University Innovation, who suggested John pursue a commercial application for Inkpath. During the following two years, Mark's team helped the new education technology entrepreneur secure seed funding, professional support and resources to begin developing the business.

In 2017, John decided to take a leap and spin Inkpath out to form a standalone company. He describes the experience as the hardest thing he has ever done. Nonetheless, he is keen to encourage other academics and university professionals to draw on the support on offer to make the most of their ideas. "I took a risk and asked for help, and it paid off. In the past three years, I've learned more than I did in the ten before. It has enabled me to bring together different aspects of my professional experience to make an impact in an area I'm passionate about", John reflects. "I hope my experience shows university innovation isn't limited to scientific breakthroughs and