

**Lawton Smith, H., Glasson, J., Simmie, J., Chadwick, A. & Clark, G. (2003)**  
*Enterprising Oxford: the growth of the Oxfordshire high technology economy*,  
Oxford: Oxfordshire Economic Observatory, ISBN 1 874370 33 8, £20 (pbk)

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Academic entrepreneurship is increasingly regarded as a staple of the knowledge economy and a *sine non qua* for any serious UK research university. The standard for this activity has been set by Cambridge University, which is now widely regarded as the exemplar English high technology success story. This fact must stick in the craw of those other universities which are just as research active and commercially-minded as Cambridge, but have won much less of the kudos and recognition of their past enterprising activities. Indeed, Imperial College, University College and Oxford University can all in their own ways stake claims to being their own kind of economic 'phenomena' alongside the Cambridge version popularised by SQW in the 1980s.

The idea of a 'Cambridge phenomenon' alludes to the title of an oft-cited 1985 report by economic development consultants Segal, Quince, Wicksteed. *The Cambridge phenomenon* is an exciting and well-told story which undoubtedly played a major role in placing Cambridge firmly at the centre of the way key British opinion-formers regarded university entrepreneurship. The success of that story has brought funding into Cambridge, not least in the form of the Cambridge Massachusetts Institute, which attempts to use Cambridge as a conduit to shake up UK academics with the 'magic' of American entrepreneurial practices. Given these kinds of rewards that image building can bring, it is perhaps unsurprising that other leading universities have begun to seek ways to tell their own success stories.

This is precisely what *Enterprising Oxford* sets out to achieve, explicitly to chart "Oxford University's transformation to the UK's most entrepreneurial university" (p. 16). Obviously, there is a parallel implicit aim, to position Oxford as a serious contender in future science policy debates over the location of future national scientific assets such as CMI. Taken together, those two aims certainly constitute an ambitious project, although, as I have argued, there are sound reasons why it is plausible for Oxford (and a number of other universities) to achieve this goal. *Enterprising Oxford* is produced by the Oxfordshire Economic Observatory, a partnership between academics in Oxford's two universities who are involved into research into high technology territorial development. The book is published as two volumes, each of around 100 pages, each priced at £20. The combination of the value this represents and the experience of the contributors is a strong foundation in the attempt to tell a story to rival the now well-worn *Cambridge Phenomenon*.

The majority of the Oxford story is told in the first volume, the second volume being mainly a statistical annex providing lots of maps of the location of different high technology sectors in the county of Oxfordshire. The first volume begins by giving a little of the history of the Oxfordshire high technology economy; the main section comprises an overview of the key individuals businesses, institutions and planning authorities in Oxfordshire. This is followed by a detailed scenario-building exercise, highlighting key future issues and developing tentative scenarios for 'Oxford 2008'. This is a sensible structure, and provides several cuts through the Oxford situation. This potentially offers the possibility of much greater depth to the narrative, building

connections between these chapters into a satisfying and convincing narrative about 'Enterprising Oxford'.

The story is told in the main across two chapters; this story is neatly summarised in table 2.1, which provides a timeline of the key activities, personalities and events which have shaped the emergence of high technology Oxfordshire. The timeline is particularly useful, because it is the clearest statement of narrative in the report, and helps in making sense of the evidence presented elsewhere. The basis of the story is that there were a few 'sticky individuals' who popped out of public sector research institutions, both universities and government laboratories, and built dense and dynamic entrepreneurial networks which have persisted to the current date. These networks have provided a 'honeycomb' which has been attractive to other high technology businesses, which have come to Oxfordshire to access these networks.

The rest of the book is given over to explaining how this honeycomb of high technology networks is filled in, and there are some memorable observations made through the book. Echoing Wicksteed's (2000) map of Pye Laboratories in Cambridge, there is a diagram from one high technology firm, Oxford Instruments, and the spin-offs which came out of it. Oxford Instruments almost overshadows the other firms, because it is an order of magnitude more successful as a source of spin-outs than any other company mentioned, and as the text indicates, its' founders have progressed to found an entrepreneurial network offering mentoring and financial support to many other local spin-of firms. Through the course of the four main chapters, a wide range of material is presented which does begin to create a sense of an 'Oxford story'.

However, this very interesting story is obscured to some degree by a tension in the book between the various goals it sets itself. At different times, *Enterprising Oxford* is a research report, a glossy brochure, a lobbying document and a consultancy study. There are a number of voices all speaking together in the report, to academic readers, to local development agencies, to national policy makers, and to the observatory's 'clients'. These different voices make it harder to disentangle the significance of what is said in the text; phenomena like Oxford Instruments spin-outs are presented alongside single companies which have achieved far less, but all in the same slightly breathless, hyperbolic style. This has quite a disconcerting effect, because it removes all sense of magnitude from the various claims made in the text.

The other problem is that so much material is presented relating to Oxford that there is no sense of effort. Reading the text, the impression is given that people, companies and institutions have not really had to try particularly hard to achieve what they have done, so one is not sure what lessons can be learned and transferred to other situations. Reading the book, I was keen to ask why did Research Machines concentrate on the educational market? Was there an event in 1973 which made them determined to assemble machines as an OEM rather than develop their own? Although there is a huge amount of material presented in the text, I do not feel that it always adds together to give a sense of depth and answer the kinds of questions which would allow give the story robustness. Some of the cross-references in the text cross over each other, leaving much unsaid; although the Oxford/ Cambridgeshire High Tech Corridor is mentioned at several points in the text, all those mentions reference other sections, so the authors never really say what the Corridor is, and what is its importance to Oxford's story.

As an academic reader, I would like to have seen more of the narrative pulled together by the means of a more detailed analysis of the evidence. A few more diagrams like table 2.1 and those in chapter 5 would have been very interesting; I would like to have seen some effort to draw an overall map of the system, linking people, firms and institutions, as some other authors have attempted for other situations (*cf.* Henry & Pinch, 1999). I can understand why the report has this appearance, because it reads like a consultancy report which has to fulfil a partly promotional role and be upbeat about Oxford's prospects. It is also an edited collection, which makes it much more difficult to draw together connections between chapters, and to synthesise the different contributions into a coherent narrative.

Rereading this review, I am acutely aware that it seems excessively critical of *Enterprising Oxford*, a criticism which the report, on the whole, does not really merit. At £40 for the two volumes, *Enterprising Oxford* compares exceedingly well with the £90 SQW charged for their 2000 report on Cambridge, as probably each have a comparable amount to say about university entrepreneurship in the UK. *Enterprising Oxford* is a refreshing complement to much of the hyperbole written about Cambridge, and a reader who can tolerate a certain level of purple prose will undoubtedly find much to interest them in this extensive and interesting report.

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