

Supporting creative student freelancing and startups:

What works?

Marcus Simmons, Course Leader

MSc Entrepreneurship & Innovation Management

marcus.simmons@falmouth.ac.uk



Marcus Simmons

Course Leader MSc Entrepreneurship,
Falmouth University | Award Winning Digital...



Summary

- Let's have a discussion & share success
- Falmouth context – creative
- Startup support provided & tools used
- What worked and what did students most value?
- Ideas for effective EE student support
- Student startup examples

Who have we got in the room?

What is your MAIN role?

- Student enterprise support
- Teaching enterprise / entrepreneurship (credit bearing modules)
- Research
- Other
- Entrepreneur (side hustle or previous venture?)
- Your most successful enterprise education exercise / programme?

Who am I?

- Marcus Simmons - Senior Lecturer, Entrepreneurship
- BA Industrial Design, MSc Ergonomics
- 6 years – UK & USA textile manufacturing
- 5 years - Blue Chip & SME management consultancy
- 13 years – award winning entrepreneur
 - Founder and Managing Director
 - Hotel booking website iknow-uk
 - Employed over 65 people
 - Exited through management buyout
- 10 years – award-winning entrepreneurship lecturer
 - Course Leader MSc Entrepreneurship & Innovation Management



How did we get here?

- University of Lancashire
 - Students love doing business
- Launchpad
 - You can have too much support
- Launchpad Futures
 - A little money goes a long way with motivated students



Account of Practice

Lessons learned by educator and students through experiential entrepreneurship

INDUSTRY
& Higher Education

Industry and Higher Education

1-6

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/09504222211023419

journals.sagepub.com/home/ihe



NATIONAL ENTERPRISE EDUCATOR AWARDS

2023 WINNERS Entrepreneurship Catalyst

Chapter 12
**Extreme Experiential
Entrepreneurship
Education:
What If Students Must
Start a Business?**

The importance of motivation (Launchpad)

Extreme Experiential Entrepreneurship education: What if students must start a business? (n.d.).
In Cases on Experiential Learning in Higher Education for Economic Innovation and Growth.



- Determined entrepreneurs
 - Entered Launchpad with an explicit, strong desire to launch a defined business concept and followed it through
- Willing entrepreneurs
 - Joined Launchpad with an enthusiasm for business startup, but without the single-minded purpose shown by the determined entrepreneurs.
- Casual entrepreneurs
 - Entered Launchpad without the drive to succeed, no specific business idea to develop, and subsequently returned to jobs very similar to what they did before

What does an entrepreneur look like?



FALMOUTH UNIVERSITY

- Falmouth is small – approx. 6,000 students
- Top ten UK Arts University
- Top in UK for Games Design
- Top five for UK University startups (number not value)
- Freelancing is the norm in many creative sectors
- Increasingly tight funding environment
- Lots of creative business ideas
- Non-industry-specific advice startup advice
- I am the EE team (0.4)!



Startup Activities 2024 to 2026 – extra-curricular

- Be your own boss
- Dragons Den competition
- Enterprise enabling fund
- Startup / Freelance 121's
- (In-class Startup / Freelance sessions)



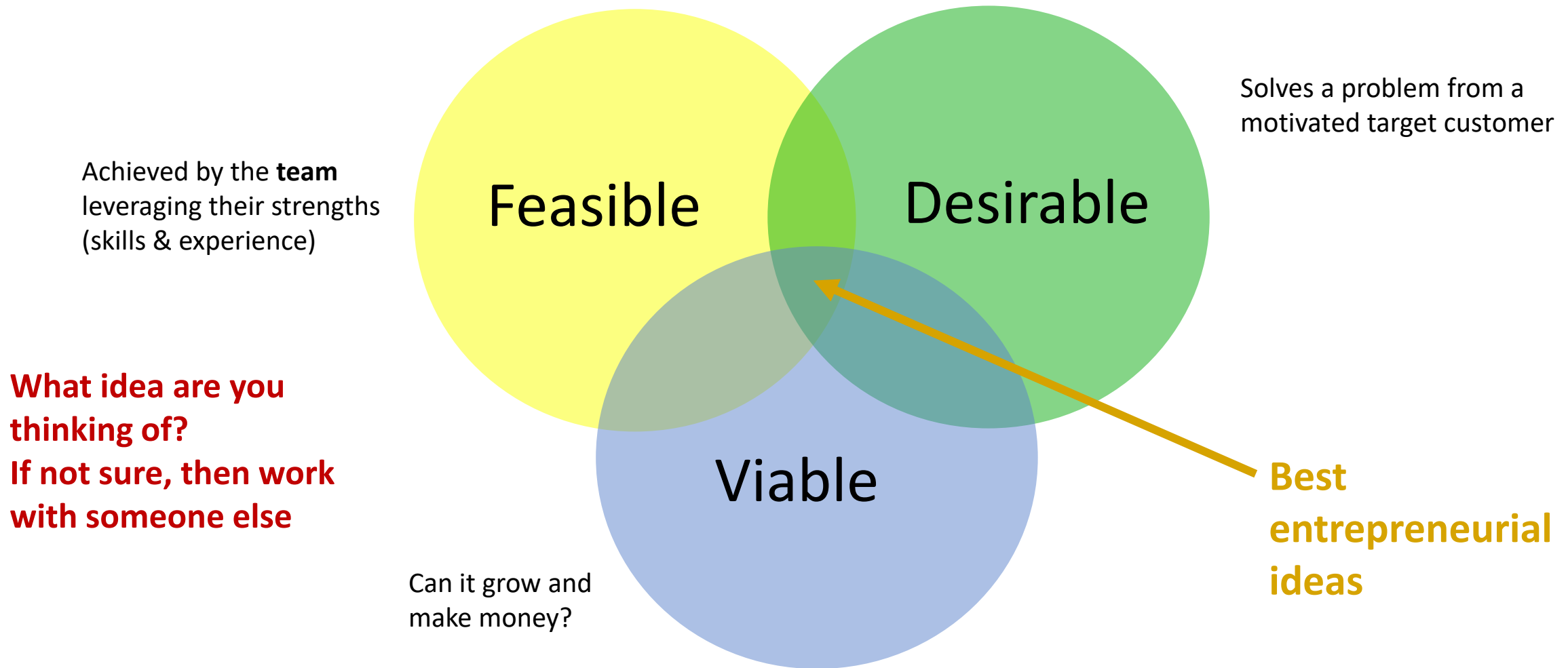
- Language is important (Emma Thatcher & Lucy Nicholson UAL)
- Hustle to get the word out and students in (Dan Syder, Manchester University)

Be your own boss

- Three well publicised workshop sessions
- Focus on students taking action to test their business concepts
- Also promoted
 - Entry to Dragons Den competition
 - Access to Enterprise Enabling Fund
 - MSc Entrepreneurship



What makes a good business idea? (Ref: IDEO & design thinking)



Desirability (Priority 1)

You need to achieve 'Product / market fit' – so answer these questions:

- What is my product / service?
- Who are my customers?
- What pains have they got?
- What gains can I give them?
- How do you know this is true? (Test the market)



Feasibility (Priority 2)

- Can this idea be done?
- Have I (and my team) got the right skills?
- (If not, where will the skills come from?)
- Have I got the time and resources to do it?
- If I need more resources, where will they come from?



Viability (Priority 3)

Can this idea can be delivered in a profitable way?

- How do we sell this for more than it costs?
- What are the costs to acquire each customer?
- What is the lifetime value of each customer?

This analysis is the third part of the overall assessment because it is informed and shaped by the previous analysis (Desirability and Feasibility).



Three Circles Worksheet – Work in pairs

- **Desirable**

- What problem am I solving? What pain am I taking away, or gain am I giving?
- Who is my target market? How do I know this problem exists?
- **Validate the problem** e.g. I tested it with target customers and found that...

- **Feasible**

- The key skills & experience **I have** are...e.g. I've experienced this problem and have skills such as...
- Skills and experience **I need** are... e.g. I need a co-founder with X skill e.g. app developer

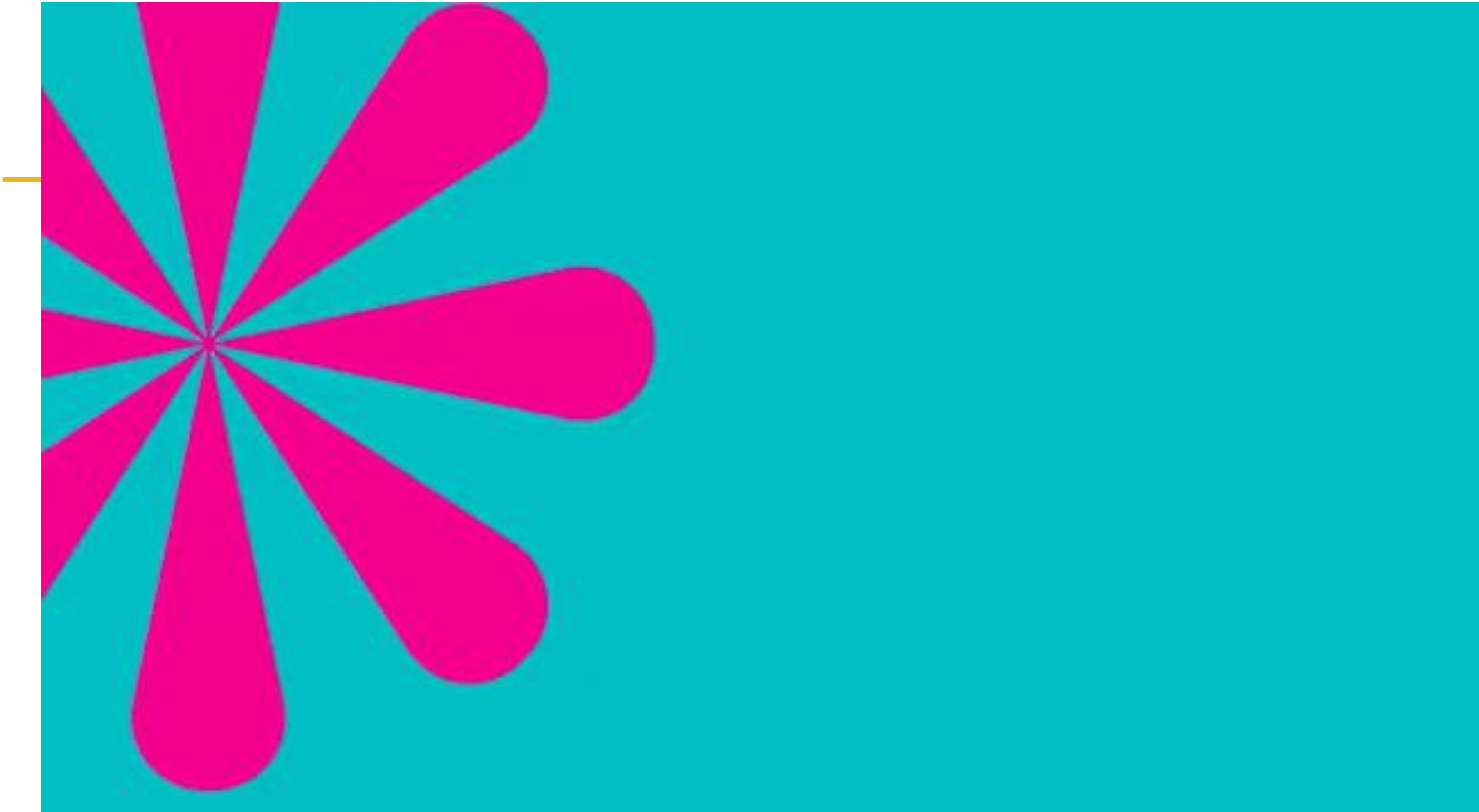
- **Viable**

- I can develop this idea with these resources...e.g. with £500 I can make a prototype / test the market
- My business will make money because....e.g. I've already sold one, have people willing to buy

Dragons' Den competition

- Six finalists share £6,000 prize fund
- Past winners present launch event
- “Dragons Den” brand cuts through to get students involved (and the money)
- Three application support sessions
- Two pitch sessions for finalists





Enterprise enabling support & fund

- Up to £500 to test / validate / launch your business
- For things that help progress towards gaining your first paying customer.
- Complete form to apply (most didn't)
- Decisions made on most compelling applications
- **Launchpad MUST pay by card & receive an invoice**
- Only available until March 2025 – so get a move on!
- Various T&Cs

FALMOUTH
UNIVERSITY

Launchpad Futures Enterprise

This project is part-funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and is responsible for monitoring the progress of projects funded through the fund.

Name:	Georgie Morton
Total amount requested (incl VAT)	£482

Details of funds applied for:

What are the funds for? i.e. what will they be spent on? Please list each item & cost

- Full day 'Design your own' stained glass workshop at Heart of Glass Cornwall Date: - £85
[Heart of Glass Cornwall | Secure Checkout](#)
- 40pcs Stained Glass Sheets, 4x6 Inches Variety Vibrant [Stained Glass](#) Pack with Multiple Transparent for Mosaic Crafts - £60.99
[CHICSHIS 40pcs Stained Glass Sheets, 4x6 Inches Variety Vibrant Stained Glass Pack Opaque and Transparent for Mosaic Crafts : Amazon.co.uk: DIY & Tools](#)
- Deluxe Stained Glass Starter Kit - Leading and Foiling - £263.02
[Deluxe Stained Glass Starter Kit - Leading and Foiling](#)
- Professional Stained Glass Grinder with UK Plug, 4200RPM Diamond Grinding Tool - £72.99

Enterprise enabling support & fund

Funds can be accessed for the following: (not an exhaustive list but shows the kind of things that we can fund)

- **Advertising**, online or offline (e.g. for an event, your product or service)
- **Software subscription** e.g. something that helps you design, develop, prototype or produce your first products.
- **Event costs** e.g. room hire, catering
- **Travel costs** e.g. to connect with your first customer, distribute your first orders, attend an important trade show
- **Expertise** e.g. product design, engineering, legal, industry expert etc
- **Marketing** e.g. photography, video, graphic design, copywriting
- **Website creation**
- **Software scoping** e.g. helping to turn your idea into an app development specification

Funds CANNOT be accessed for the following:

- This is not an exhaustive list but shows the kind of things that we CANNOT fund. If in doubt, ask.
- **Cash** – we can't give you cash to spend. We have to buy the things you need.
- **Donations / sponsorship**
- **Alcohol**
- **Stock** or products to resell.
- **General expenses** claims (but we can pay for agreed travel costs)

Next steps...

- Notice the opportunities around you
- **Take action!** Test & improve your product
- How can you get your first customer(s)?
- Be open to working with others
- Book a startup 1-2-1
- **Sign Enterprise Readiness form - NOW**
 - Apply for Enterprise Readiness Fund
 - Enter Dragons Den
 - Consider an MSc Entrepreneurship

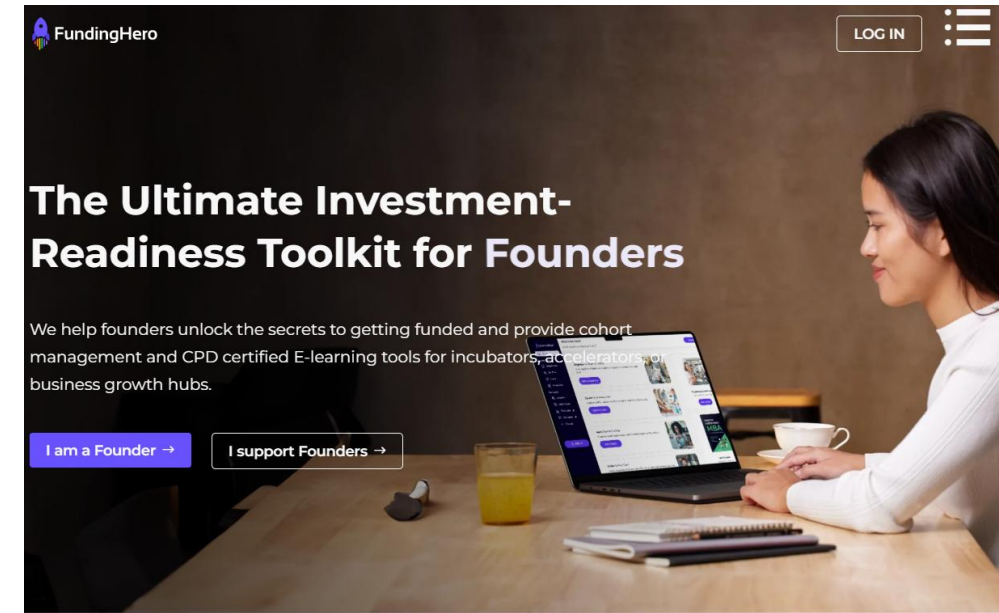
Millions saw the apple fall



But only Newton asked why

Startup / Freelance 121's

- Direct 121 coaching
- Booked through employability or direct with me
- Talking through their ideas
- Removing blockages to action & first customer
- 121s great tool - Jim Shirley, Funding Hero (transcribe)
- Available outside regular academic calendar & timetable
 - Apply for Enterprise Readiness Fund
 - Enter Dragons Den
 - Consider an MSc Entrepreneurship



In-class Startup / Freelance sessions

- In class sessions / various courses
 - Creativity is your business superpower
 - Business startup basics (legal structure, IP etc)
 - Show me the money (pricing & tax)
 - Personal branding
- Also used to promote:
 - Enterprise Readiness Fund
 - Dragons Den
 - MSc Entrepreneurship



Supporting creative student freelancing and startups:

What works?

Research

Marcus Simmons, Course Leader

MSc Entrepreneurship & Innovation Management

marcus.simmons@falmouth.ac.uk



Marcus Simmons

Course Leader MSc Entrepreneurship,
Falmouth University | Award Winning Digital...



Research: Sue Langford, Plymouth University

- Reached out to students from two academic years of support
 - 26 enterprise enabling fund and / or Dragons Den (excluded MSc Entrepreneurship)
 - 19 interviews agreed, 12 conducted
- Semi-structured interviews in three sections
 - Motivation and Entry: Why students got involved
 - The Startup Support Experience: What happened, what was it like?
 - Reflective Value: The most impactful elements of support
- Teams call transcribed
- Thematic analysis – combined transcripts, observations & student feedback & discussions
- Aim to find out what worked best from a student perspective

Diverse creative student subject areas

-
- Marine and natural history photography
 - Fine Art x 4
 - Journalism and Creative Writing
 - Games design
 - TV and film production
 - Popular Music
 - Business with Digital Marketing or Creative Events Management
 - Photography (part-time lecturer)

Supporting creative student freelancing and startups:

What works?

Findings

Marcus Simmons, Course Leader

MSc Entrepreneurship & Innovation Management

marcus.simmons@falmouth.ac.uk



Marcus Simmons

Course Leader MSc Entrepreneurship,
Falmouth University | Award Winning Digital...



CREATIVE TO CEO: THE IMPACT OF FALMOUTH STARTUP SUPPORT



BOOSTING CONFIDENCE & LEGITIMACY

Turned passion projects into feasible realities, feel like industry-standard professionals.

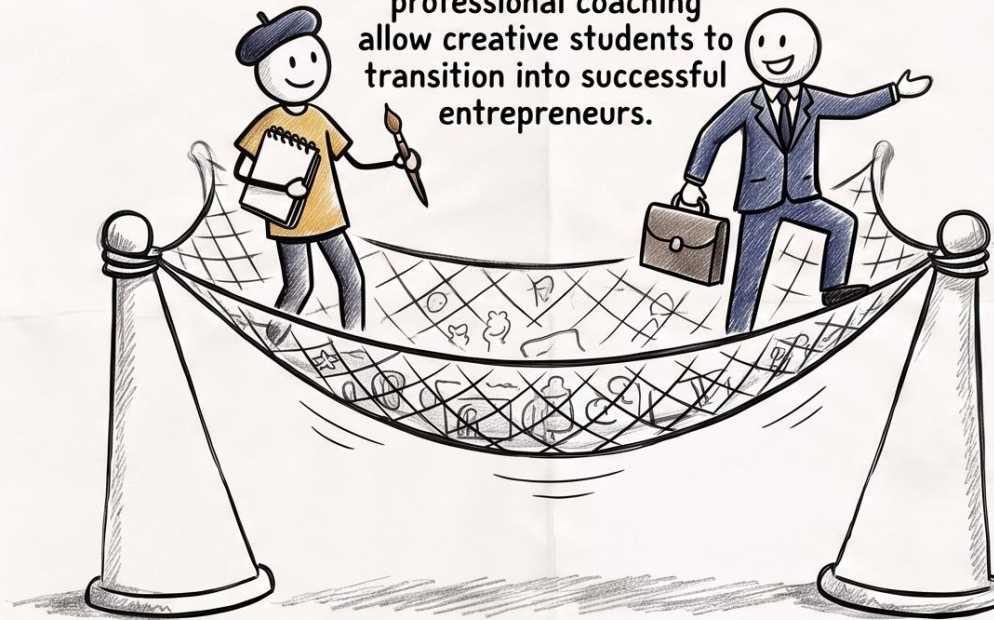


MASTERING "UNSEXY" BUT VITAL SKILLS.

Provided foundational knowledge in hidden areas like invoicing, tax, and professional networking.

THE SAFETY NET:

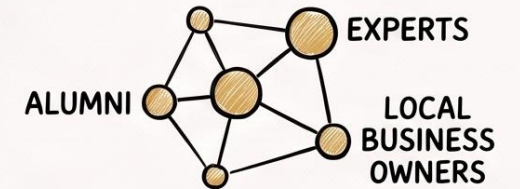
Small financial injections + professional coaching allow creative students to transition into successful entrepreneurs.



FUND ESSENTIAL GEAR.

Enabled purchase of vital equipment: professional microphones, laptops, kilns, high-quality art supplies.

CONNECTIONS ARE AS VALUABLE AS MONEY



Access to a network was a primary driver of success.



REAL-WORLD REVENUE & HIGH-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT.

Secured national media contracts (BBC, PA Media), launched successful shops, and gained better industry jobs.

Motivation and Entry:

Why Students Got Involved?

- Looking to remove barriers to starting e.g.
 - Financial and equipment barriers
 - Acquiring “how to?” business knowledge (literally, ‘what do I do next?’)
- Exploring self-employment/ alternatives to job / employment
- Exploring a business idea / opportunity

The Startup Support Experience: What happened, what was it like?

- **Dragons den** – pitching was very rewarding but intimidating & stressful
- **Administrative Challenges** – simple enterprise enabling grant form put many off (good!), some restrictions, need to be specific & generate income
- **Academic Tensions** – inevitable timetable & submission deadline conflicts
- **Ongoing informal coaching relationships** – many sought further advice as enterprises gained early traction & new challenges emerged

Reflective Value:

The Most Impactful Elements of Support

- **Coaching and Mentorship Over Capital:**
 - Encouragement, confidence, 'just do it', 'real life' / experienced mentor providing individual advice – “having someone in your corner “you can do this”
- **"Snowball Effect" of Networking**
 - e.g. DD contestants & judges, Kreyon DD winners gained internships
- **Unsexy Business Literacy:**
 - Students deeply appreciated the "basics" of business operations e.g. invoicing, payment terms, tax, business bank accounts

Useful Findings for EE Programme Delivery

- **Communication**
 - Many students reported finding out 'by chance' about EE support programmes.
 - Funding is the best 'hook' to grab attention / gain engagement
 - Dragons Den 'brand' cuts through communication smog
- **Mentoring over cash:** personal coaching more valued in long term
- **Action over theory** valued by students
- **Curriculum disconnect:** (these) students wanted more business basics imbedded in their course from year 1

Insights for effective EE providers

- You're not the target market for student businesses
- Students to provide evidence of product market fit
- Important to listen for what is required – always something different so be specific to them
- Encourage students to take action & focus your time on those who do
- Form ongoing mentoring relationship
- Measure success based on actions taken
 - e.g. test events, number of paying customers



Supporting creative student freelancing and startups:

What works?

Student Examples

Marcus Simmons, Course Leader

MSc Entrepreneurship & Innovation Management

marcus.simmons@falmouth.ac.uk



Marcus Simmons

Course Leader MSc Entrepreneurship,
Falmouth University | Award Winning Digital...



Aimee Shardlow Fine Art

- First 121 Jan 2024
- £250 for Wix e-commerce website in July
- £1,000 art show sales Sept 2024
- Now happy sole trader, selling her art, but still part time employed in hospitality
- *"Honestly, without that [funding] I would not be able to have done it cuz things are just crazy expensive... and it's nice to have the support but also nice to have someone in your corner... just kind of being like, 'you can do this'..."*



Danielle Hutchinson

Journalism & Creative Writing

- In-class startup session: April 2024
- Entered freelance work out of job-market necessity.
- Needed broadcast-quality audio gear to gain freelance and PA Media news contracts.
- Received £430 from the Enterprise Enabling Fund for professional microphone and lapel mic.
- Filmed high-profile figures (Prince William, Kemi Badenoch) and Storm Goretti footage featured nationally.
- Valued practical negotiation advice (asking for 20% upfront payment).
- *"Although on paper it's kind of a small pot of money to get started, it's all the connexions and experience and networking that then leads to other projects... it's all kind of branched out from the initial conversation."*



Ben Perkins

Business & Digital Marketing

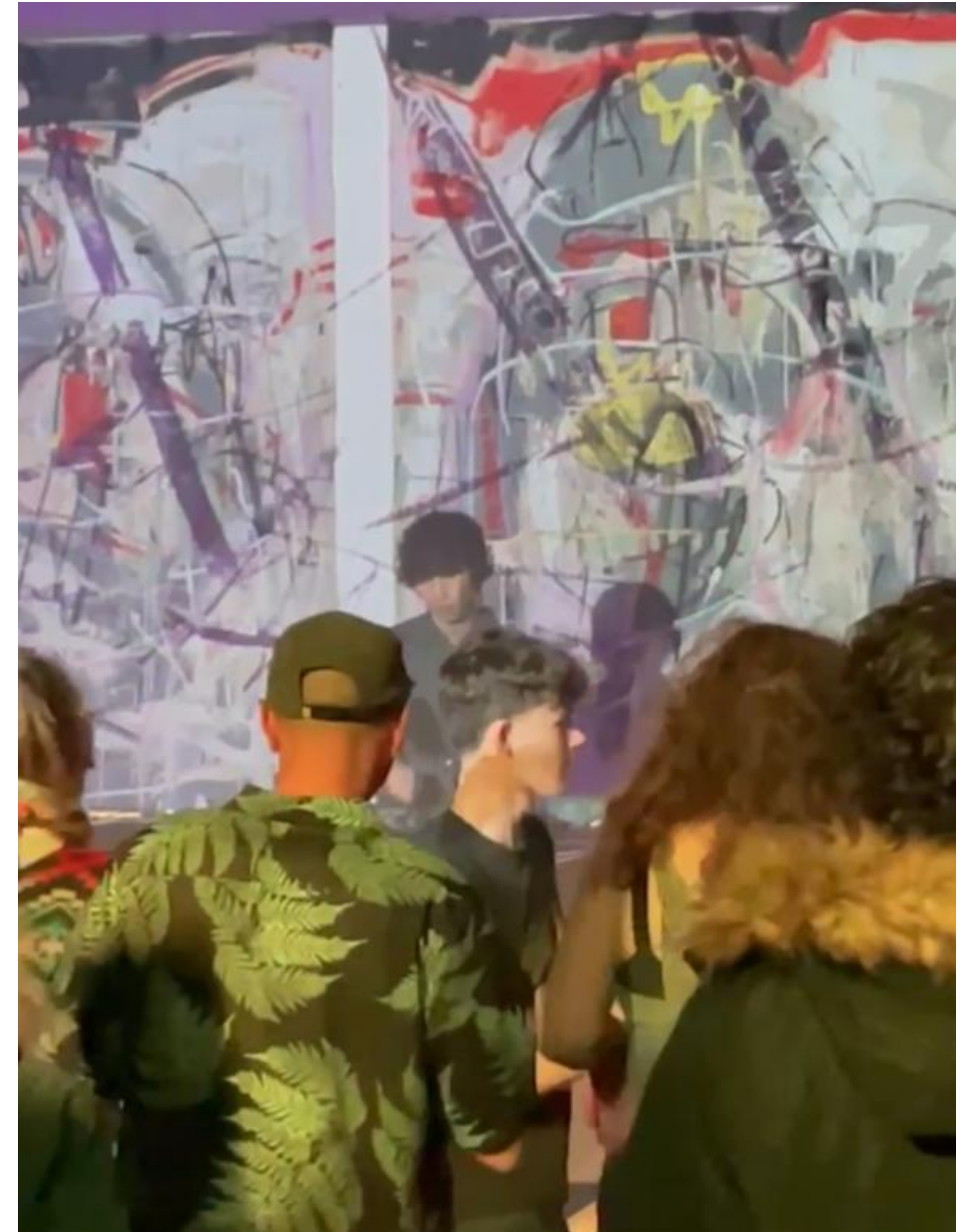
- Dragons Den application: Feb 2024
- Coached on presenting jewellery business
- Invested Dragon's Den funds in ring materials, tooling, packaging, and digital marketing.
- Valued ongoing mentorship, which gave him the confidence to scale up and launch new brands.
- "The whole Dragons Den event, I think, really helped kickstart me in a really good way with my business at uni... that really gave me a boost of confidence..."
- <https://www.benperkinsmakes.com/>



Sam Judd

Sustainable Festival Management

- Enquiry for Enterprise Enabling Fund: Nov 2024
- Ran two test events which broke even on costs.
- Headline artist impressed & booked for future events.
- *“For me, it was a great confidence-building experience for putting on larger-scale events with more financial and operational responsibility (e.g. Dealing with more established artists expecting a higher level of production and organisation). It has led to me developing my ideas for future events, and I'm now developing a new event series for next year with a different creative vision to tie into my studies and a bit more ambition.”*



Janina Fleckhaus

Photography lecturer

- Startup 121: Sept 2024
- Wanted to develop mushroom infused chocolate
- £500 for chocolate tampering machine
- Sold out at test event which generated funds and built confidence
- *"Maybe like not necessarily the money, but the advice that advanced the business most... I probably would have given up but Marcus always said 'people who give up don't succeed.' ... I keep hearing his voice like all the time...."*
- <https://lumamushroom.co.uk/>



Supporting creative student freelancing and startups:

What works?

Questions & comments please

Marcus Simmons, Course Leader

MSc Entrepreneurship & Innovation Management

marcus.simmons@falmouth.ac.uk



Marcus Simmons

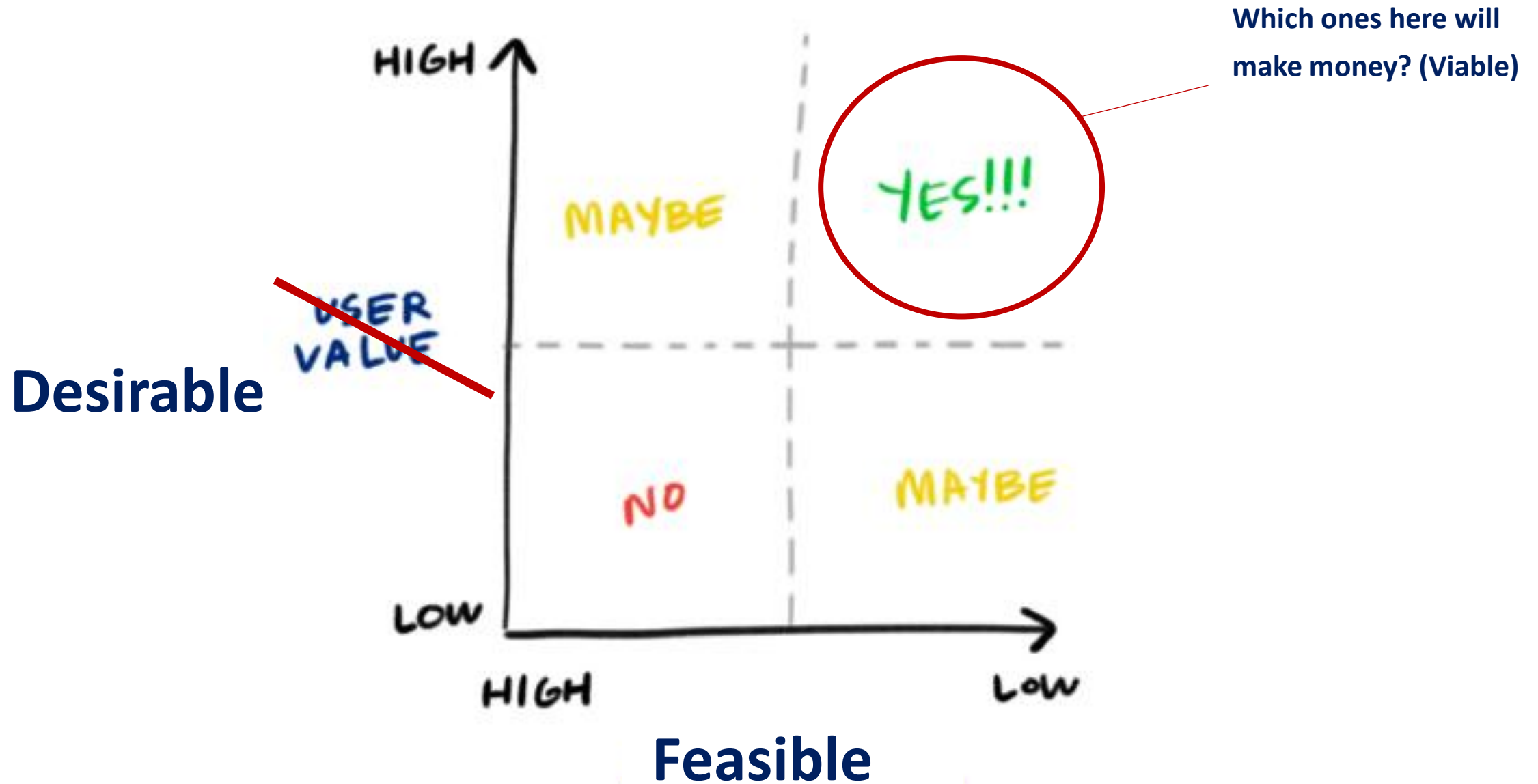
Course Leader MSc Entrepreneurship,
Falmouth University | Award Winning Digital...



References

- IDEO, n.d. The Three Lenses of Innovation. [online] IDEO U. Available at: [ideou.com](https://www.ideo.com) [Accessed 28 August 2026].
- Simmons, M. (2021). Lessons learned by educator and students through experiential entrepreneurship. *Industry and Higher Education*, p.095042222110234. doi:10.1177/09504222211023419.
- Extreme Experiential Entrepreneurship education: What if students must start a business? (n.d.). In *Cases on Experiential Learning in Higher Education for Economic Innovation and Growth*.

What if we have lots of ideas?



Launchpad Futures Enterprise Enabling Fund

This project is part-funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Cornwall Council has been chosen by Government as a Lead Authority for the fund and is responsible for monitoring the progress of projects funded through the UK Shared Prosperity fund in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

Name:	Georgie Morton
Total amount requested (incl VAT)	£482

Date of application	06/01/26
First part of postcode:	TR11

Details of funds applied for:

What are the funds for? i.e. what will they be spent on? Please list each item & cost

- Full day 'Design your own' stained glass workshop at Heart of Glass Cornwall Date: January - Friday 30th
- £85
[Heart of Glass Cornwall | Secure Checkout](#)
- 40pcs Stained Glass Sheets, 4x6 Inches Variety Vibrant [Stained Glass](#) Pack with Multi Colours and Textures, Crisp Art Mosaic Sheets with Iridescent, Opaque and Transparent for Mosaic Crafts
- £60.99
[CHICSHIS 40pcs Stained Glass Sheets, 4x6 Inches Variety Vibrant Stained Glass Pack with Multi Colours and Textures, Crisp Art Mosaic Sheets with Iridescent, Opaque and Transparent for Mosaic Crafts : Amazon.co.uk: DIY & Tools](#)
- Deluxe Stained Glass Starter Kit - Leading and Foiling
- £263.02
[Deluxe Stained Glass Starter Kit - Leading and Foiling](#)
- Professional Stained Glass Grinder with UK Plug, 4200RPM Diamond Grinding Tool for Glass, [Jewelry](#), Ceramics, Portable Design with Acrylic Splash Guard
- £72.99
[Deruolong Professional Stained Glass Grinder with UK Plug, 4200RPM Diamond Grinding Tool for Glass, Jewelry, Ceramics, Portable Design with Acrylic Splash Guard : Amazon.co.uk: DIY & Tools](#)