



## **Brilliant Catalyst, a business incubator at Ontario Tech, has supported 500+ start-ups**

By Jennifer Foden

Located on the Oshawa campus of Ontario Tech University in the Energy Research Centre building, there's a mid-size room that's the headquarters for Brilliant Catalyst, a start-up incubator. "We run a variety of programs where we support entrepreneurs with their start-ups—whether you're at that initial stage where you just have an idea but you're not quite sure how to bring it to life or you're hoping to take your business to the next level," says Maryam Akhtar, program officer at Brilliant Catalyst. The business incubator, which was launched in 2018 by Ontario Tech president Dr. Steven Murphy, supports students, faculty and recently alumni through various entrepreneurial programs like Brilliant Incubator and Brilliant Ventures.

Participants in the Brilliant Incubator program learn how to start and grow their business. There's an eight-week intensive guided incubator that has an intake twice during the school year—choose from either the business or podcast stream—or there's an asynchronous business option where folks can learn at their own pace. Everyone who completes the Brilliant Incubator program gains access to workshops, pitch competitions with prizes, mentorship from industry experts, on-campus space and funding application opportunities like the Firefly Fund, which is up to \$5,000.

As for businesses that are a bit further along, there's the Brilliant Ventures fund, which answers the question of: how can we get extra funding? "One thing we really wanted to do is see if there was an opportunity for us to invest in companies that were gaining traction," says Leen Jaber, program officer at Brilliant Catalyst. "We're looking to invest in about 15 companies over a three-year period. We're mainly tackling energy, mobility and agri-tech. However, we are also expecting that a lot of our students are very creative outside that zone." The fund is focused on "tech with a conscience" and they've just invested in their very first business: Scooty, a micro-mobility company that provides the public with simple and affordable access to electric scooters.

And since 2018, Brilliant Catalyst has supported many brilliant minds: they've helped over 500 student and alumni start-ups, plus have deployed over \$900,000 in funding to support these growing businesses. Success stories include Axcessiom Technologies, a





driver assistance system that uses facial gesture and voice recognition technology to activate different functions of a vehicle, Moduleaf, an autonomous farming robot that monitors and harvests indoor crops, and Ekstera, a generator that sources electricity from any heat source.

And Brilliant Catalyst supports start-ups beyond the walls of Ontario Tech, too. Their Start-Up Visa program provides 12 months of mentorship to any international entrepreneur who wants to immigrate to Canada, helping them establish and grow their businesses in Durham Region. They've worked with close to 250 companies from over 20 countries around the world. "We know the hype is always around Toronto," says Jaber. "So, we're trying to tell new immigrants, this is a great place for you to come. These are all the things here that will support you."

There's also Experience Ventures, which provides students with paid experiential learning opportunities that focus on entrepreneurship and innovation, Black Entrepreneurship and Skilled Trades, a training program helping to support Black youth ages 16 to 39 who are under-represented in these fields, and Seize the Moment, another training program, which focuses on under-represented groups like women, youth, people with disabilities, racialized folks, et cetera.

Brilliant Catalyst is self-funded by grants and has quickly grown in its six years on campus. "The team went from three people to 10," says Akhtar. "So, we're definitely growing and expanding the programming."

This is part of a 10-article series profiling the innovation happening in Durham Region. The region has been recognized as one of the top seven Intelligent Communities in the world for the third year in a row. Learn more at [durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities](http://durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities) and [IntelligentCommunity.org](http://IntelligentCommunity.org).

