

FabLab

FabLab Belfast is a fully kitted digital fabrication workshop which provides everyone, from small children through to entrepreneurs and businesses with the capability to turn their ideas and concepts into reality.

Using Open Source software and a selection of computer controlled machines including a selection of 3D printers and laser cutters, users of the FabLab can design, make or prototype almost anything.

To date, Fablab have concentrated on running externally funded programmes aimed at tackling the digital divide as well as offering outreach services to local schools. However the operating team have always been interested in exploring the commercial potential of the lab and how it could market its services as an income generating social enterprise.



What support has NBEI provided?

FabLab representatives approached NBEI in search of revenue funding to help commercialise Fablab's services. Before funding, NBEI completed an **independent market research study** to test the viability of a commercial FabLab product and to identify potential users for its services beyond

Based on this market research paper, NBEI provided funding to cover the **salary** of a **business development manager** who was responsible for developing a more commercial image as well as attracting users who were willing to pay for the use of Fablab services and expertise

The NBEI investment package also included funds to help cover overheads linked to **marketing, branding and project administration**. It also provided an allowance to procure the services of **consultants** on an ad hoc basis, who could use their sector experience to help develop the new Fablab brand

How has NBEI support helped and who has benefited so far?

- In addition to offering prototyping services, NBEI support also helped FabLab develop and offer a range of accredited training qualifications in Digital Fabrication and Graphic Design. Some are still being developed in partnership with City and Guilds whilst the lab is also being used to host a summer school in partnership with the University of Ulster;
- The lab has also created multiple internships—in partnership with Santender for young people looking to develop their skills and learning as well as relevant work experience in digital technologies;
- Although commercial uptake has been limited, the business development manager made some useful contacts with broader stakeholders and managed to lever in funding from various sources including Belfast City Council. This demonstrates the relevance of the Fablab brand the potential of its services to continue to tackle issues stemming from the digital divide.