inSCight

He kōrero whakahihiko nō roto mai i Te Whare Pūtaiao
Inspiring stories from the Faculty of Science

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Invested in Science

The research creating economic, environmental and societal impact

Waipapa Taumata Rau
University of Auckland

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inSCight 2026

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Cover image: Green-lipped mussels.
Photo: iStock.com/Napat_Polchoke

A word from the Dean

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, tēnā koutou.

Welcome to the 2026 edition of *inSCight*, our annual publication celebrating the people, discoveries and innovations emerging from the Faculty of Science at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland.

In this edition, we showcase the breakthrough research, partnerships and technologies helping to shape a better future. These stories demonstrate the power of science to move beyond discovery, transforming ideas into solutions that enhance wellbeing, strengthen economies, and address some of society's most pressing challenges.

From photons to fungi, and artificial intelligence to aquaculture, our researchers and alumni are advancing knowledge while creating tangible benefits for communities, industry and the environment. Their work is driving sustainable innovation, improving performance and contributing to economic growth here in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

Through strong connections with government, community organisations, industry and international partnerships, our researchers are accelerating the journey from discovery to application. The stories in these pages highlight the impact that can be achieved when expertise, curiosity and collaboration come together.

As Dean of Science, I invite you to explore the 2026 edition of *inSCight*. I hope these stories inspire you to learn more about research, connect with our people, and support the world-leading science that is making a difference locally and globally.

Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi.
Engari, he toa takitini.

Success is not the work of one,
but the work of many.



PROFESSOR MICHAEL KINGSLEY
Manukura Pūtaiao | Dean of Science (Interim)
Te Whare Pūtaiao | Faculty of Science

Kia ora koutou, and welcome to *inSCight* for 2026

Kia ora koutou,

Welcome to this year's *inSCight*, which focuses on commercialisation in the Faculty of Science.

Commercialisation is a timely theme for a variety of reasons, most obviously because it has been strongly emphasised in the ongoing science sector reforms. The New Zealand Institute for Advanced Technology, a new Public Research Organisation, has a mission to accelerate advanced technology research and commercialisation in this country. There has also been a significant boost of government investment in the organisations and professionals who support research commercialisation in Aotearoa.

Commercialisation is an important aspect of the University of Auckland's response to the reforms, which come at a time when the wider research system is facing increasing funding pressures. In particular, commercialisation will be prominent within our 'Frontier Technologies' Signature Research Area (SRA), one of six SRAs that the University launched earlier this year. A technology at the global 'frontier' has a competitive advantage that is often built on strong underlying scientific research.

More generally, research in New Zealand has matured a lot over the past 10 to 15 years – there are ever-increasing flows of capital and numbers of start-ups over that period. The Technology Investment Network reports that New Zealand tech companies now attract more than $0.6 billion in capital investment each year, and spend around $2 billion on R&D. Recent moves by local institutional investors have been very encouraging. In 2026 there have been heavy investments by the Kiwisaver fund Simplicity into the Bridgewest deep-tech and health fund, and by the NZ Superannuation Fund into Movac's Growth Fund 7. Critically for tertiary education, increased investment means that there is greater demand for motivated and skilled people to run and staff start-up companies.

The University, via our commercialisation arm UniServices, is a key cog in the national wheel. We are ranked as Australasia's No 1 university in active research start-ups, in no small part due to UniServices' Inventors' Fund which was established in 2016 to support and invest in early-stage prospects, supported by the Return on Science investment panels. The University's ecosystem extends to incubation facilities at the Newmarket Innovation Precinct, strong talent development through the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship and specialist support for impact in health via MedTech-iQ. The University also maintains academic networks that are strongly entrepreneurial, notably through the national Centres of Research Excellence.



An image of Aotearoa from the Visible Earth, NASA Earth Observatory collection. Image: iStock.com/1xpert

Increasingly, Auckland City is getting on board. Auckland Council ran its second Startup Week this October, while the Mayor's "100 Days of Startups" social media campaign aptly captured the potential for our city and region.

Commercialisation is certainly not new to our faculty. Quantifi Photonics, an Auckland firm specialising in optical test and measurement technologies that was acquired for more than $100 million last year, owes its origins to Southern Photonics, a company founded in 2001 from Department of Physics research. However, there is enormous, untapped potential to further leverage the work of our globally leading research, and I encourage readers to help us to make this happen.

This year's *inSCight* profiles a variety of our researchers and alumni who are showing how it's done. They are working in areas of established strength for the faculty, such as data science (Hyades, Litmaps) and biotech (Hyphera); in emerging capabilities such as AI (enviPath); and in capability clusters such as aquaculture, and the Photon Factory and Microfabrication Facility. At least four more Science-affiliated start-ups have emerged since the start of 2025, with the latest (Seascape) closing a $3.4 million funding round in August.

Finally, it's appropriate to acknowledge all those working in the wider ecosystem in Aotearoa. It is often said that commercialisation is a team sport, and thanks are certainly due to all those who mentor and support the entrepreneurial founders who are taking their ideas from our campus to the world.



PROFESSOR GEOFF WILLMOTT
Manupiri Rangahau | Associate Dean (Research)
Te Whare Pūtaiao | Faculty of Science



University of Auckland spinout uses AI to predict chemicals' environmental fate

enviPath aims to be the world leader in forecasting how chemicals break down in the environment.

Led by computer scientist Dr Jörg Wicker, enviPath Ltd.'s clients so far include chemical giants from Germany one of which is Bayer, an energy and petrochemical company from the UK, and a large cosmetics firm.

How AI predicts environmental risks

EnviPath's AI models predict whether new chemicals will degrade into substances which pose risks to human health or ecosystems and how long they will persist in the environment.

That's important information for makers of fertilisers, pesticides, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, and for environmental regulators, especially in the European Union where rules are strict.

As chemicals enter the environment, bacteria munch away on them. A harmless chemical can degrade into something toxic, while the opposite can also occur, with toxic chemicals becoming harmless.

EnviPath addresses a critical and well recognised gap in environmental risk assessment: while the hazards of parent chemicals are often well characterised, their transformation products are frequently unknown, despite often being more persistent, mobile, or toxic.

"These models can come up with answers in seconds or minutes," says Jörg, who's a senior lecturer in the School of Computer Science. "A company planning a new product can identify problems right at the start instead of years into the development process."

UniServices, the University of Auckland company which supports the commercialisation of University research, funded Jörg to get the company off the ground in late 2024. Jörg is CEO and his former student Tim Lorsbach is co-founder and chief technology officer, based in Germany.

The company is likely to seek capital for expansion in 2027.

"I've worked on this project and its antecedents for my whole academic life, so you can imagine how keen I am for it to succeed," says Jörg. "It's not just the commercial opportunity, it's doing something for the environment."

EnviPath licenses companies to use its technology and access the data. It's free for academic users, who number in their thousands.

"There's only one other commercial company in this area and we believe we're providing a superior service," says Jörg.

Above: Lake Matheson, New Zealand. Photo: iStock.com/Onfokus

Supporting regulators and manufacturers

The company's openly disclosed methods and scientific papers published by Jörg and his colleagues in peer-reviewed journals have established enviPath's credibility with manufacturers and regulators.

The latter include the European Food Safety Authority, the Helsinki-based European Chemicals Agency (a regulatory arm of the European Union), and the Environmental Protection Agency in the US.

In the European Union, a strict regulation called REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals) has applied to chemical substances since 2006.

EnviPath is promoted at scientific conferences and via a regular booth at SETAC Europe, one of the largest international conferences in environmental toxicology and chemistry. Regulators are kept informed via direct discussions, technical exchanges, and formal presentations.

Andy Shenk, former CEO of UniServices, is an adviser to enviPath.

"From the perspective of university commercialisation and technology translation, enviPath represents a strong example of research with genuine market relevance," he says.

"The platform combines scientific credibility with a clear value proposition for regulators and industry, which is essential for successful commercial development."



Dr Jörg Wicker presenting at the Department of Computer Science, University College London in 2026.
Photo: Michelle McGrath

The science behind enviPath

EnviPath's offering builds on decades of research, including a biodegradation database set up in 1995 at the University of Minnesota and later inherited by research institute Eawag in Switzerland.

A leading environmental chemist, Professor Kathrin Fenner of the University of Zurich and Eawag, is a collaborator with whom Jörg has worked since the start of his PhD research in Germany in 2007.

EnviPath licenses data for its models from Eawag. It is also on the verge of signing an agreement with a major chemical company to get access to its data.

Traditionally, establishing how chemicals degraded required long and expensive lab work, such as that carried out by the University of Minnesota from the mid-1990s.

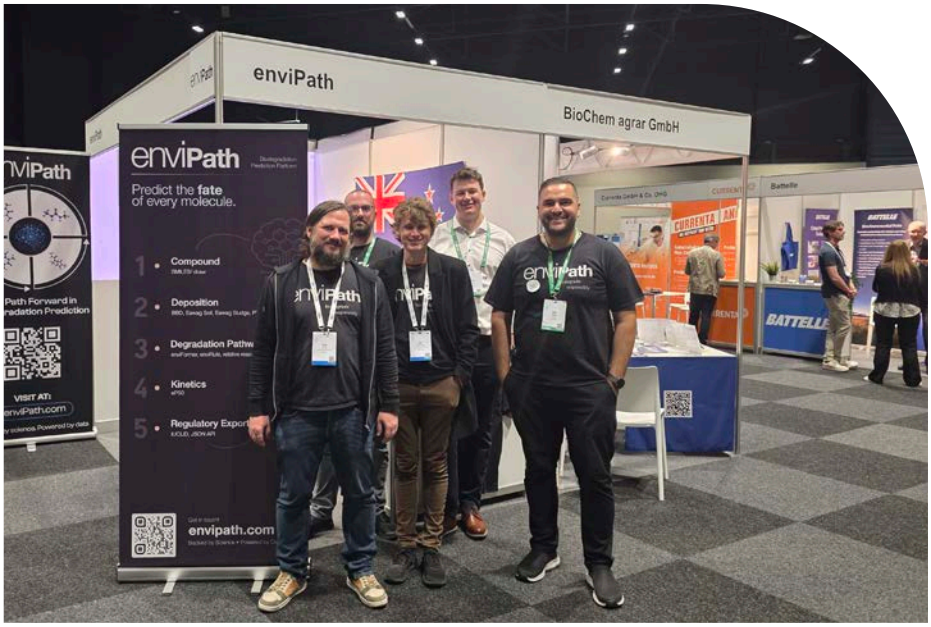
That painstaking work built up the data used to train enviPath's AI models, developed at the University of Auckland over the past five years.

Globally, about 130,000 chemicals are on the market, Jörg says.

Bacteria readily degrade organic materials such as oil, petrol, diesel, and many industrial solvents, often converting them into carbon dioxide, water, and biomass.

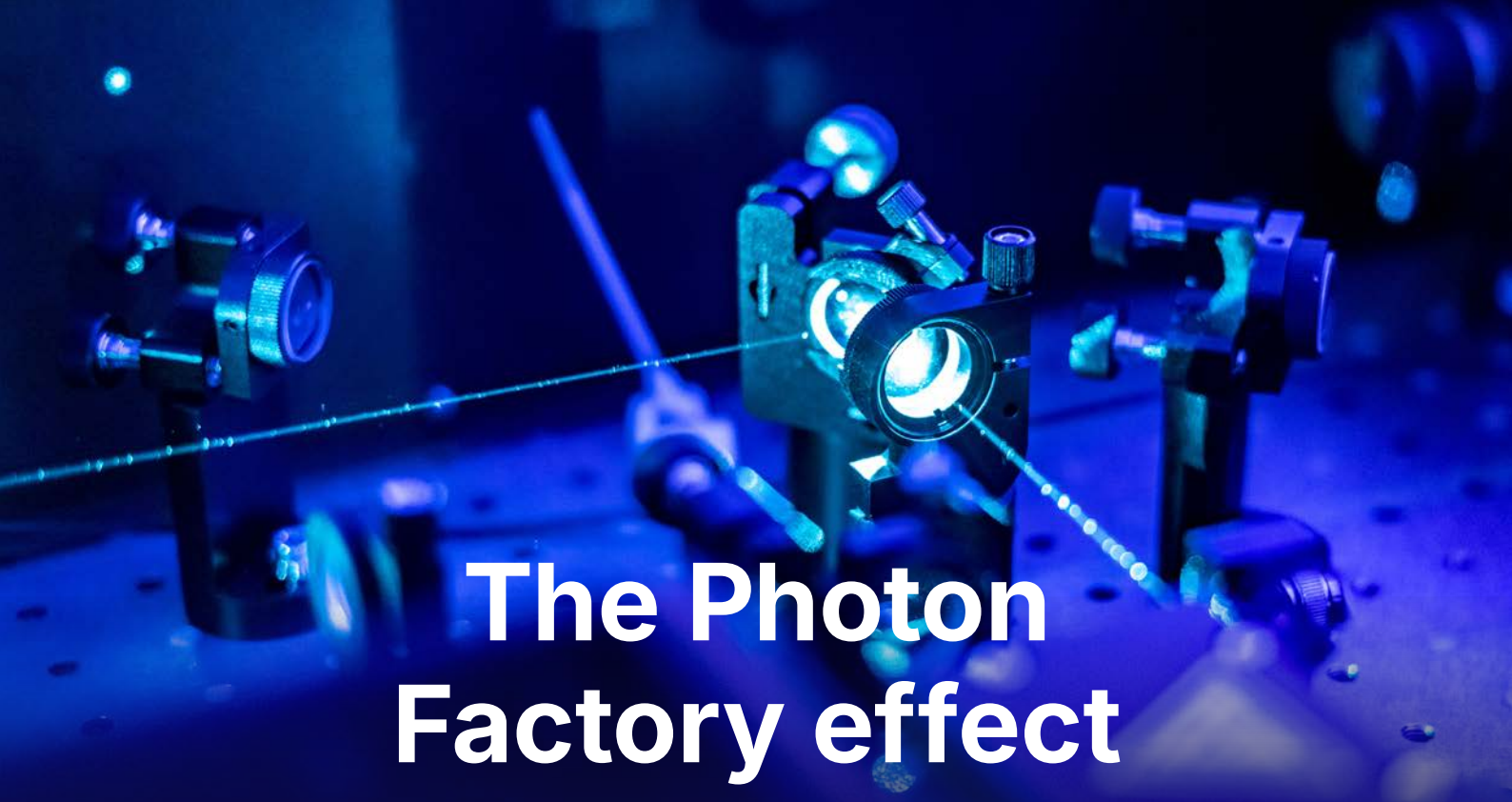
Some bacteria can also partially degrade pesticides, pharmaceuticals, and certain plastics, although more slowly.

Famously, "forever chemicals", with their powerful carbon-fluorine bonds, resist breaking down at all. ●



From left: Jörg Wicker, Tim Lorsbach, Liam Brydon-Browm, Tobias Olenyi, and Yaser Shakib at the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry (SETAC) Europe Annual Meeting in Maastricht.

Watch a talk by Jörg on the environmental fate of chemicals at the University of Auckland's Gibbons Lecture Series 2026. Video: youtu.be/t59vWi1oiCw



The Photon Factory effect

How a small team of researchers became one of New Zealand's most prolific innovation engines.

When it comes to entrepreneurship, commercial impact and real-world outcomes, the Photon Factory shines brightly.

What started out in 2009 as a multidisciplinary research group founded by Professor of Physics and Chemical Science Cather Simpson has become a veritable production line of spinouts which have used lasers to identify cattle sperm, detect cancer and even destroy varroa mites on bees.

"I've found that having an impact like that is very, very different, but just as important as understanding something fundamental that winds up in a textbook," says Cather.

The sheer volume of grants secured by Photon Factory researchers highlights the alignment of their research with Government objectives, such as the current Science Investment Plan which directs investment toward opportunities with the greatest potential to drive economic growth and long-term prosperity.

Since 2012, the Photon Factory has attracted government grants totalling around $30 million, almost $23 million of which was secured by Cather's team for fundamental and applied research.

"The group was extraordinarily effective at communicating that we are a community of scholars and inventors trying to solve really important, exciting problems," she says. "We were awarded our first Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) grant, and that set us off on a steep, industry-facing, entrepreneurial trajectory."

Turning photonics into global health solutions

The first of the spinouts was Engender Technologies, which used photonics to separate male and female sperm cells in cattle to solve the problem of gender selection, and was acquired by the world-leading animal genetics company CRV International in 2018.

Then came Orbis Diagnostics, which started out in 2016 evaluating the complex components in milk to improve quality, and then morphed into an immunity-testing business during Covid, before developing a world-first Hepatitis B testing kit based on a simple pinprick of blood.

With 50 percent of the world's liver cancers caused by the deadly virus, Orbis is attacking a massive global health problem as it prepares for a pivotal US clinical trial that will hopefully pave the way for FDA approval and launch into a market estimated to be worth US$1.5 billion.

"If it all goes the way it's supposed to, we'll enter the US market in 2029," says Cather as Orbis CEO. "We're well past the research stage. We're fully in development doing key verification and validation studies."

Orbis has also attracted the attention of the US Hepatitis B Foundation, and CEO Dr Chari Cohen says their diagnostic tool could help eliminate hepatitis B worldwide.

"Having a triple panel point of care diagnostic test for hepatitis B would be transformational, overcoming a significant barrier that would allow us to test, diagnose, and link millions more people with medical care and treatment that could save their lives."

A common feature of all Photon Factory start-ups has been the injection of seed capital from the University's commercialisation arm, UniServices, and many have also been backed by the Asia-Pacific deep-tech investment firm Pacific Channel, founded by University alumnus Brent Ogilvie.

"The Photon Factory was intentionally outwardly facing from the very beginning," says Cather, who ran a programme to train

Above: Laser reflect on optical table in a quantum laboratory.
Photo: iStock.com/Михаил Руденко

emerging researchers on how to manage research contracts. “So it was really important early on that we achieved what we said we were going to achieve.”

More recently, Cather has been appointed to the board of the New Zealand Institute for Advanced Technology (NZIAT), a new Public Research Organisation set up as part of the 2025 science system reforms. The NZIAT is designed to bring researchers, industry and investors closer together, with a clear focus on translating cutting-edge science into real-world impact.

“We’ve been tasked to be bold, and I think the time is right,” she says. “It’s not the No 8 wire mentality that’s the problem, it’s the translation to commercial impact that we need to build on. We need to capitalise better on our cleverness.”

However, she says it’s also important not to lose sight of the fundamental research that forms the bedrock of the Photon Factory’s success.

“We need to make sure as a country that we invest across the pipeline or else we’ll narrow the funnel at the entry point. The risk is that we effectively stop entrepreneurial activity right at the start when it’s a research idea.”

Lighting the way in cancer detection

As a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Chemical Sciences, Dr Michél Nieuwoudt is full of praise for the collegial environment that exists within the Photon Factory.

“This freedom to interact and learn and give advice, that’s what makes this place grow. It’s the interaction between resources and the symbiosis of people wanting to do things together.”



Professor Cather Simpson. Photo: Simon Young

It was while she was working on a project using what’s known as Raman spectroscopy to monitor farm milk quality for Fonterra that she thought of applying the same technology to skin cancer. After all, “skin is a complex biological material; milk is a complex biological material,” says Michél.

Another motivation was the early death of a relative from melanoma. “There are more people that die from melanoma than road deaths every year. So, I was like, well, we can certainly do something about that.”



> “This freedom to interact and learn and give advice, that’s what makes this place grow. It’s the interaction between resources and the symbiosis of people wanting to do things together.”
>
> – Dr Michél Nieuwoudt

Initially supported by a $1 million MBIE Smart Ideas grant, a research team rapidly developed a device that has proved superior to existing skin analytics like mole mapping.

“Other skin analytic technologies require unnecessary biopsies on lesions, whereas our device is much more accurate. So we thought, ‘this is cool, let’s try and form a spinout company,’ and that’s what we did.”

Luminoma has so far raised more than $5 million from investors including Bridgewest Ventures, Pacific Channel, and the government to get the company off the ground. “You need investors, and someone to believe enough in your product,” says Michél. “It’s a leap of faith for them, so we work really hard to say, ‘we’re going to make this work for you’.”

Fast forward to 2026, and Luminoma is now undertaking a pilot study at six different clinics throughout Auckland to build a new algorithm. It’s also raising fresh capital to develop a hand-held wand called LumAssure™ that could reach the market within three years.

There’s also a new collaboration with the world-renowned Mayo Clinic which Michél says will broaden their testing to a wider range of skin types and will be critical for entry into the United States.

“They’re excited by what our device can do that others can’t, and they see a lot of possibilities.”

And while some populations don’t have the same challenges with melanoma, the

technology has the potential to identify other skin problems.

"It's very hard sometimes to distinguish psoriasis and eczema in adults and children, but our device can do this accurately. It would just be a non-invasive 10 second measurement, point and shoot, to get the outcome."

As Luminoma's chief scientific officer, Michél was recognised as a finalist for the 2025 KiwiNet Researcher Entrepreneur Award and says her passion for the project is driven by all the grateful patients who've had measurements taken in their clinic.

"They're so happy that we're doing this, and so it inspires us even more."



> "We found the right laser parameters in terms of power, exposure time and frequency. The dose is delivered to the mites and we are able to kill them with the lasers without harming the bees."
>
> – Dr Francesco Merola

Lasers, bees and the next wave of spinouts

The idea of using lasers to kill the invasive varroa mite that destroys bee colonies worldwide had been bandied about within the Photon Factory for several years before Dr Francesco Merola joined the Faculty of Science as a Senior Research Fellow in 2022.

However, the cheerful Italian physicist was the first to embrace the concept of developing the world's first 'intelligent beehive' with a project that was initially supported by a $1 million MBIE Smart Ideas grant in partnership with the Bee Biology & Productivity Team at Plant & Food Research (now the Bioeconomy Science Institute).

"They believed in us and we are now in the third year of this amazing Smart Ideas project," says Francesco.

Using Plant & Food's PC2 Physical Containment lab in Hamilton, the researchers have developed a prototype device that uses a combination of cameras and lasers to achieve their objective.

"We found the right laser parameters in terms of power, exposure time and frequency. The dose is delivered to the mites and we are able to kill them with the lasers without harming the bees."

A key challenge is to develop an algorithm, using machine learning, to detect which bees carry the mites and intercept them before they enter the hive and harm the brood. "The algorithm will inform the laser to fire when the bee is in the right position."

The aim is to design a device that's cost effective for beekeepers who currently use relatively cheap pesticides to treat the varroa. But the work can be time consuming when they often have to travel several hours to treat hives multiple times in remote locations.

"Another key challenge is to get the technology out of the lab and working in the hive at the right price," says Francesco.

Using relatively cheap micro cameras and 3D printed plastic boxes will contain costs, and the price of lasers continues to fall, but the devices will also provide added value.

"This technology can also provide other information to beekeepers like mite and bee counting. We can also monitor temperature and humidity, assess bee behaviour, and analyse the pollen and honey quality automatically."

Meanwhile, the pathway to commercialisation has started to accelerate with the formation of a company called Beam Agritech which has initially raised $1.3 million in seed capital, loans and grants to deliver a minimum viable product within 18 months.

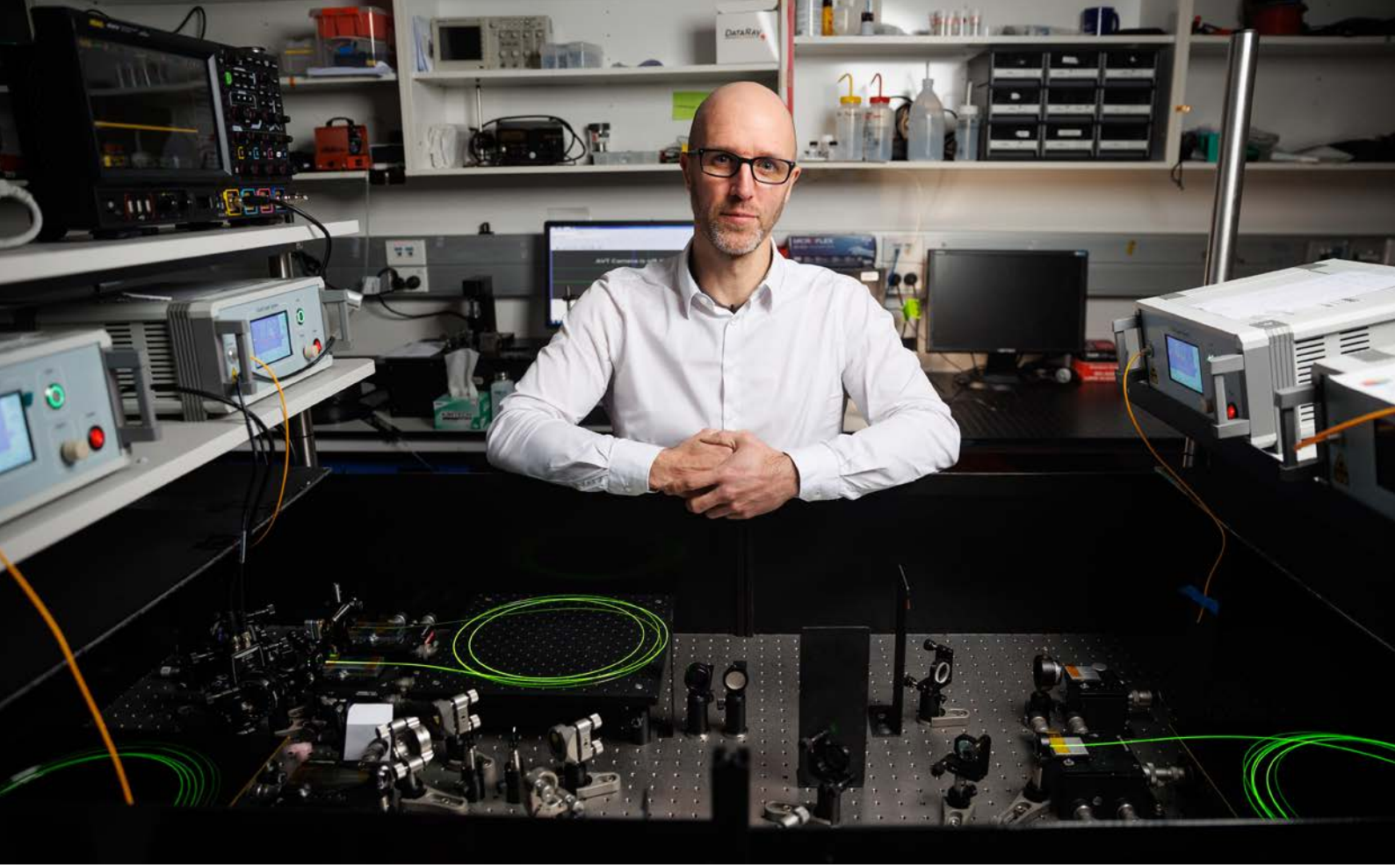
"Our big milestone is to have something that we can put on the market and sell. This is



Beam Agritech prototype device deployed at one of the Auckland field sites.



Dr Francesco Merola (second from left) with the Beam Agritech team at the Bioeconomy Science Institute in Ruakura.



Dr Claude Aguergaray.

our dream," says Francesco, although it's not just about increasing productivity or making money.

"I want to make something that's good for the environment as well. If we could reduce the use of chemicals, not just in the hives but in general, I think it would be a better world with less pesticides."

Yet another Photon Factory spinout is Probentis, established by Dr Claude Aguergaray to develop a laser-driven diagnostic tool that robotic surgical platforms could use to accurately identify cancer cells in real time for prostate surgery.

"Along with our clinical advisers, we have identified the right performance metrics and impact on patient management."

After eight years of research, the team has demonstrated highly accurate prostate cancer detection using measurements that take only a few seconds and achieve performance that exceeds MRI and standard pathology.

"We're focused on developing a machine to ensure that cancer isn't missed during surgery. Currently, if the machine tells a clinician that an area is benign, we are 96 percent sure that it is actually benign," says Claude. "They start to be numbers that would be useful for a machine to be implemented in real life."

> "We aim to support science that is relevant to New Zealand, and to current and future researchers."
>
> – Dr Claude Aguergaray

Clinical trials under way in 2026 are designed to predict whether prostate cancer is present without the need for invasive biopsies, and further trials in 2027 will help determine surgical margins which could lead to better patient outcomes.

"You have to satisfy the health insurance companies and the hospitals. To maximise the chances of adoption for a new medtech device, it needs to show better patient outcomes at a lower cost."

Up until now, the research has been funded by MBIE Smart Ideas grants worth $2.33 million, with additional support from Te Tītoki Mataora – MedTech Research Translator, and the Te Whai Ao – Dodd-Walls Centre. Probentis was also kick-started with seed capital and expertise from UniServices.

Looking ahead, commercial advisers will help raise capital and navigate the regulatory environment for a market-ready product while Claude plans the next clinical translation trials. "All these pieces of the puzzle will answer the broader question about clinical utility."

As the recently appointed director of the Photon Factory and Microfabrication Facility, Claude is also guiding the research Platform into a new phase where it provides a suite of instruments that enables a wide range of high-quality research – and ensures alignment with the University's new 'Frontier Technologies' Signature Research Area and government priorities, including those of the NZIAT.

"We aim to support science that is relevant to New Zealand, and to current and future researchers."

And while the core capabilities of micromachining, surface processing and sensing remain, new frontiers will be explored in areas like space and conservation work – in addition to existing commitments to the agritech and health sectors.

"These are areas in which New Zealand has real strengths and form an important part of our economy. At the same time, the health challenges we face are often shared globally which creates opportunities for our solutions to have international impact." ●

Turning data into decisions

Hyades is making complex spatial data more accessible.

Behind almost every important decision is a mountain of data. Flood management, infrastructure planning, mineral exploration and environmental monitoring all rely on information collected over years, sometimes decades. Yet much of that data remains underused because analysing it requires significant technical expertise.

University of Auckland alumni Ashin Alex, Sam Kurian and Jimin Seo believe the challenge is not just in collecting information, but in making sense of it.

Through their startup Hyades, the trio are developing technology designed to help organisations turn complex datasets into predictions that support real-world decisions. The technology is particularly focused on spatial data – information tied to a physical location.

"Companies come with the data, and they come with a question they want answered from that data," says Jimin.

That question might be whether a river is likely to overflow following heavy rainfall, where a mining company should focus future exploration efforts, or which areas are most vulnerable to flooding.

The information needed to answer those questions often already exists. Councils, researchers, businesses and government agencies collect extensive environmental and geographic data: everything from rainfall records and river measurements to satellite imagery and geological surveys. The difficulty lies in bringing that information together.

Making sense of data

Datasets are often stored in different formats, collected using different methods and designed for different purposes. Before any prediction can be made, the data must be cleaned, organised and transformed into a format suitable for machine-learning models.

Traditionally, that process has required specialist expertise to synthesise these datasets into a unified format that is ready for machine-learning training. Hyades aims to automate much of that work.



Hyades co-founder Jimin Seo.

> "We're essentially providing the capability of an added data engineer, machine-learning engineer and an analyst in one."
>
> – Ashin Alex

"We're essentially providing the capability of an added data engineer, machine-learning engineer and an analyst in one," says Ashin.

Using the company's platform, organisations upload their data and describe, in plain language, what they want to learn from it. The platform then analyses the information, prepares it for modelling and tests different approaches to determine which model is best suited to the task.

In simple terms, it acts as a bridge between raw information and useful predictions.

Unlike generative AI tools that can produce convincing but inaccurate responses, Hyades is designed around transparency and verification. Rather than simply generating an answer, the platform shows users how a model has been created, allowing them to review and evaluate each step. The goal, says Jimin, is to keep humans in the loop and give organisations confidence.

For co-founder and software lead Sam Kurian, the approach grew out of a frustration familiar to many researchers and data scientists. Building machine-learning models is often a repetitive and time-consuming process requiring many technical decisions along the way. Sam began exploring ways to automate those steps, creating tools that could test and optimise models automatically rather than relying on engineers to perform every task manually. That early work eventually evolved into a platform capable of handling much larger and more complex datasets.

Ashin, whose background is in physics and space systems, describes the company's goal as making spatial intelligence easier for non-specialists to use independently.

"Our vision is to embed spatial intelligence everywhere," he says. "We're trying to enable extra capability for organisations to make much better decisions."

Democratising spatial intelligence

Importantly, the work does not stop once a model is built.

For example, a flood-risk model created several years ago may not account for changing weather patterns. Environmental conditions shift, new data becomes available and assumptions made during the original modelling process can gradually become outdated.

Hyades' platform is designed to continually monitor and improve models as new information becomes available. This gives customers greater ownership of the process, and the opportunity to benefit from it long term. Ultimately, access is expected to operate as a subscription model. For the founders, this ongoing process is as important as creating the initial model itself.

The company has already worked across a variety of use cases, including environmental monitoring, natural hazard forecasting and research projects requiring complex predictive analysis.

While the technology itself is sophisticated, the founders see their mission in relatively simple terms: helping organisations make better use of information they already have.

Hyades' long-term vision is to help unlock the productivity and capability of people who are not data scientists or machine-learning engineers, allowing more organisations to benefit from data-driven decision making.

That vision has been shaped by the different backgrounds each founder brings to the company.

Ashin contributes expertise in science and machine learning. Sam leads the software engineering behind the platform. Jimin, who studied law and global studies, focuses on partnerships, operations and understanding customer needs. Together, they represent an unusual, but complementary, mix of disciplines.

"I can bring clients on board and handle a lot of the operational work, knowing that Ash and Sam are doing fantastic R&D and tech development work and vice versa," says Jimin.

While their academic backgrounds differ, all three founders credit the University environment with helping them explore ideas beyond their own disciplines. For Ashin and Sam in particular, the Faculty of Science provided opportunities to work across research, software development and emerging technologies, while also connecting with other students from very different fields. Those intersections ultimately helped shape the company they would go on to build together.

The combination reflects a broader truth about emerging technologies. Building successful AI systems is not only a technical challenge. It also requires an understanding of the problems people are trying to solve.

For Hyades, the goal is not to create more data. It is to help organisations turn existing data into decisions. And in a world already overflowing with information, that may be the more significant challenge. ●



From left: Harshil Magan (Founding Engineer in AI Research), and co-founders Sam Kurian, Ashin Alex, and Jimin Seo.

Reviving the shellfish industry

Novel methods to sustainably grow Aotearoa New Zealand's shellfish aquaculture industry.



Aotearoa New Zealand's aquaculture industry is forecast to more than quadruple its annual revenue to $3 billion by 2035, and marine scientists at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland are playing a key role with a range of initiatives to solve complex problems and identify new opportunities that maximise value through sustainable growth.

"If we can solve the issue with spat mortality in the mussel industry, then New Zealand can be the largest mussel farming country in the world – bigger than the rest put together. It would well and truly exceed that $3 billion goal," says Faculty of Science Research Fellow Dr Brad Skelton. Brad is an internationally recognised aquaculture scientist whose pioneering research over the past decade into production inefficiencies within the Greenshell™ mussel industry has produced some highly promising results.

Take fish predation, which has cost one Coromandel business $5 million in lost production in a single year, due in part to the voracious appetite of an increasing snapper population. "The snapper just completely destroy the lines and eat all the mussels," says Brad.

One potential non-physical deterrent is the use of acoustics to scare fish away when young mussels are most vulnerable, and three years of research funded by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) has potentially identified a suitable frequency that could be commercialised – albeit with more R&D.

"We could spend another 10 years trying to solve it. It's quite a complex issue that's increasing throughout the world, but there's no one else working on it. It's been put in the 'too hard' basket."

Above: One of many mussel farms in the Firth of Thames on the Coromandel peninsula. Photo: iStock.com/Jivko



Dr Brad Skelton (right) with international collaborators at conference visit in Sweden.

> "Mussel farming has a range of beneficial impacts on the water columns, they strip out pollutants and contaminants and improve water quality. And mussel farms create floating artificial reefs which we know provide habitat for fish."
>
> – Dr Brad Skelton

Protecting spat, boosting production

Cultivating mussels in nurseries to increase survival rates is another option – much the same as tomato seeds would be nurtured into seedlings that can survive and thrive.

It's a grim fact that 99.8% of mussel spat are lost from seeding through to harvest, primarily because they become detached and drift away. But, in collaboration with the Faculty of Engineering and the Cawthron Institute, researchers have been exploring the use of solar-powered land and sea-based contained systems which have large volumes of seawater pumped through them.

"They're trapped so they can't get out. So we're basically force feeding them over a period of months, and they grow up to larger sizes where they lose that ability to let go and drift away. And when we [then] put them on the farms, we get much better retention."

Funded by a $6 million MBIE Endeavour Fund grant, the project builds on 10 years of existing research and is being scaled up in the hope that the industry will adopt and further develop it.

"It's never been done anywhere in the world. We're trying to take technologies that have been used for oysters and clams and tweak them to work for mussels. We've got a prototype system built with industry,



> "It's never been done anywhere in the world. We're trying to take technologies that have been used for oysters and clams and tweak them to work for mussels."
>
> – Dr Brad Skelton

and that's what we're using to do the R&D, basically."

Much of the research is being conducted in collaboration with New Zealand's Greenshell industry and its predominantly iwi-owned industry partners, ranging from Waimana Marine in the Marlborough Sounds to the Muriwhenua Developments Charitable Trust in the Far North, and James Marine on the Coromandel Peninsula. There's also an international flavour to the research with collaborators at Wageningen University in the Netherlands, Denmark's National Institute of Aquatic Resources, as well as Auckland University of Technology.

Yet another project to protect spat is the development of a world-first tidally powered nursery system which has been funded by a $1.33 million MBIE Smart Ideas grant.

"The places where we catch spat in New Zealand have pretty high tidal velocities," says Brad. "So we're developing new devices that can capture horizontal tidal flow and turn it into an upwelling system so that we can put the spat inside it and then grow them up to larger sizes."

Three years of research in partnership with iwi-owned Aotea Marine Farms in Kawhia has now produced a device that works from an engineering and biological perspective.



On-water shellfish nursery system Brad and team built and tested for mussel spat.

"We've done it as a prototype, so now we're designing the large-scale systems and we'll release the designs to industry so they can actually be built on a commercial scale."

When it comes to sustainability, Brad describes the humble mussel as "the perfect animal protein" with fewer carbon emissions than tofu or grains – and they play a vital role in food chains.

"Mussel farming has a range of beneficial impacts on the water columns, they strip out pollutants and contaminants and improve water quality. And mussel farms create floating artificial reefs which we know provide habitat for fish."

A second chance for scallops

Yet another of Brad's highly promising projects involves the resurrection of New Zealand's once abundant commercial scallop industry.

"We wiped them out completely, there's no commercial fishery left anywhere in New Zealand," he says.

Since 2021, the University of Auckland has been part of a collaborative initiative called Save Our Scallops which was founded by Ocean Regeneration Aotearoa (ORA), a registered charity and environmental consultancy that has brought together researchers, iwi and industry to advance hatchery and farming techniques and hopefully recover what's been lost.

"We're creating an industry to re-seed and restore those depleted wild populations, while simultaneously creating a source of scallops that removes the need to fish the wild populations in the first place," says Brad.

Getting scallops to spawn in captivity initially proved elusive, until a long and sometimes bumpy journey back from Coromandel unexpectedly triggered some of the recalcitrant scallops to spawn in their buckets.

"We were getting desperate and we saw a shaker table in the corner of the lab spinning around," says Brad. "So we put some scallops into individual containers and basically spun them for hours on end and we found that's a really reliable way to get them to spawn."

A separate research project is focused on catching spat in the wild using spat bags – akin to a fishing net enclosed in an onion sack – which enable larvae to attach themselves and grow to a certain size.

"We've found a site in the Hauraki Gulf where we can catch commercially relevant quantities of spat," says Brad, "so that's a



Tiny mussel spat attached to fragment of seaweed.



Scallop field work with industry.



Brad on a spat farm with industry.

big win." But while one scallop can produce hundreds of millions of juveniles, reducing the mortality rate remains a challenge.

"We haven't fully closed the life cycle, so we haven't been able to breed them all the way through until they settle and look like a scallop. We're still trying to work out how we optimise those larval stages to get them through to juveniles," he says.

Farming scallops is yet another strand of research. "Once we have the source of juveniles, how do we farm them? What do we grow them in? What densities do we rear them at? What depth do we rear them at?"

From restoration to commercialisation

But progress is being made. Over the past three years the number of mature scallops being farmed has increased from 1,000 to 60,000, enough to conduct some initial trials in restaurants and take a vital step toward commercialisation.

"Once we've shown to the government that we can do it, then I think they'll pursue sites that are further offshore with deeper water and that will probably be the key to unlocking a scalable industry."

Initially funded by small grants from the University and the Cawthron Institute, the past three years of scallop research have been supported by donations from ORA.

"It's quite rare in New Zealand to get private funding for aquaculture research projects. So I think that the relationship with ORA is key because it's pretty rare to get this kind of opportunity. Typically this kind of work would be funded centrally," says Brad. To that end, he hopes that Save Our Scallops will attract MBIE support for a full five-year research programme.

"If we had that kind of money, within the five years we would have an industry. How that scales beyond that will depend on many different things, but I think we can do it now, and the fact that we can now source those spat means that we know how to do it."

Importantly, Brad's current shellfish research has generated opportunities for at least ten PhD students, who have been jointly supervised by fellow marine scientist Professor Andrew Jeffs, who is also helping to establish mussel restoration activities in Southern Chile.

At a policy level, the results of the University's various research initiatives were also used to inform the government's 2025 Aquaculture Development Plan which aims to drive innovation and significantly grow production.

"We've shown that we know what's going on, and the government is realising that this is where we should be investing money and prioritising research."

Other governments are also taking notice. In the UK, Scotland is looking to transform its mussel farming industry, and Brad has been engaged as an Independent Scientific Advisor to assess industry-relevant research proposals.

"They see that the University of Auckland is doing research to produce outcomes for the industry," he says. "Which is why they want to draw on New Zealand's experience to make sure research leads to practical changes and clear benefits for farmers." ●

> "We've shown that we know what's going on, and the government is realising that this is where we should be investing money and prioritising research."
>
> – Dr Brad Skelton

Navigating the research discovery maze

Litmaps charts a clearer path through the growing volume of scientific literature.

Whether you're a masters student writing a thesis or a seasoned academic at the cusp of a scientific breakthrough, reviewing the vast body of literature can be painstaking work. As the volume of published research grows, finding the right paper, recognising connections between fields and identifying new directions becomes increasingly difficult.

University of Auckland alumnus Axton Pitt, along with co-founders Kyle Webster and Digl Dixon, saw this as both a research problem and a commercial opportunity. Their solution was Litmaps, a research discovery platform that transforms networks of citations, authors and ideas into interactive visual maps, helping researchers see the landscape around a question rather than navigate it as a list of search results.

What began as a student-led idea has developed into a New Zealand research technology company serving researchers in more than 150 countries, with companies and universities subscribing to its platforms. In 2025, Litmaps completed a $1 million funding round led by UK-based Scholarly Angels and acquired fellow research discovery platform ResearchRabbit.

The company's growth reflects a broader commercial proposition – helping researchers navigate literature more efficiently can give them more time to conduct experiments, develop products and form start-ups, translating scientific discoveries into impact.

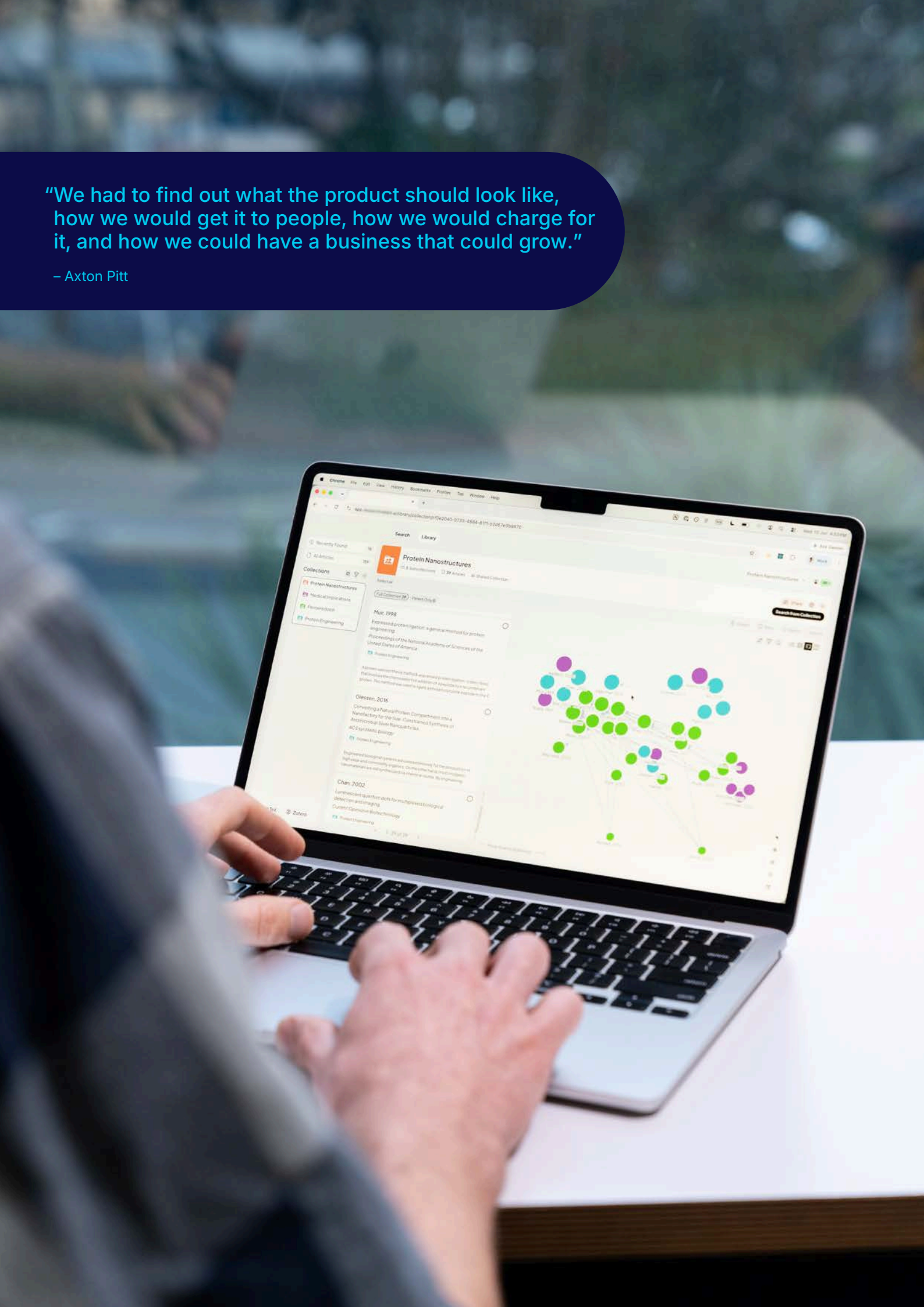
From research problem to commercial opportunity

The idea emerged while Axton and Kyle were students at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland.

Axton had completed a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Sciences and was studying towards a Graduate Diploma in Science in Computer Science when he met Kyle through Chiasma – a University student organisation focused on science commercialisation. Kyle, who was doing



From left: Dan Erik Petersen, Racheal Reeves, Kelly Rummins, Axton Pitt, Alsu Sworder, Digl Dixon, Gayani Tennakoon, Mina Zarei Sanabadi, and Nathan Harrison-Clarke.



"We had to find out what the product should look like, how we would get it to people, how we would charge for it, and how we could have a business that could grow."

– Axton Pitt

his PhD in biology, had grown frustrated with the process of making connections between different authors and papers, and the tools available were outdated and inadequate.

"We just felt the tools were stuck in the 90s. That was kind of our rallying cry," says Axton.

They began building prototypes and sharing them with researchers in the University's Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences. They figured they could help make the early stages of research not only more efficient, but enjoyable too.

"A lot of the time it's very laborious," Axton says. "You're doing lots of reading and maybe going down rabbit holes you don't want to go down."

The platform they developed accelerates a process that researchers already undertake. It begins with a "seed paper" that a researcher identifies as relevant to their topic. This gives Litmaps an initial point from which to explore the surrounding citation network, including the papers cited by the seed paper, later research that cites it and connections extending further outwards. Litmaps visualises its recommendations as a map, or "Litmap". Individual papers appear as dots, while lines represent citation relationships between them.

While citation is one way to signal connections between papers, Litmaps also uses its AI model to compare the language in paper titles and abstracts to identify conceptually related research. "They might not cite each other, but they're talking about the same thing," Axton says. This can help researchers discover relevant work outside their immediate citation network, including papers from adjacent fields.

> "Ultimately, we want to lift the impact that researchers have on society ... the mission for us is to accelerate the scientific endeavour."
>
> – Axton Pitt

Building a sustainable product

Axton and his co-founders always intended to turn the idea into a commercial offering, accessible to researchers across the globe.

"We always had a commercial bent," Axton says. "We wanted to make it a lasting product, because if it was just a side project, it would go away and not get used by people."

Creating the technology was only part of the challenge. Litmaps became possible in part because of the growing availability of open scholarly metadata. Axton and his co-founders then had to turn that information into a product capable of searching and visualising a vast research corpus while remaining intuitive for researchers to use.

"We had to find out what the product should look like, how we would get it to people, how we would charge for it, and how we could have a business that could grow," Axton says.

Researchers and students may benefit from the product but often have limited budgets.

"On one hand, we want everybody using the tool and to make it accessible," Axton says. "On the other hand, we want a growing business that is sustainable."

They took their idea to organisations such as Return on Science, gathering feedback while refining and testing successive versions of the platform. For Axton, that process resembled the scientific method itself: "Experiment. Fail. Try again. And succeed."

Litmaps' development was similarly supported by a wider network of student organisations, research-commercialisation programmes, advisers and investors.

"At every step of the way, we've had people who were willing to help," Axton says.

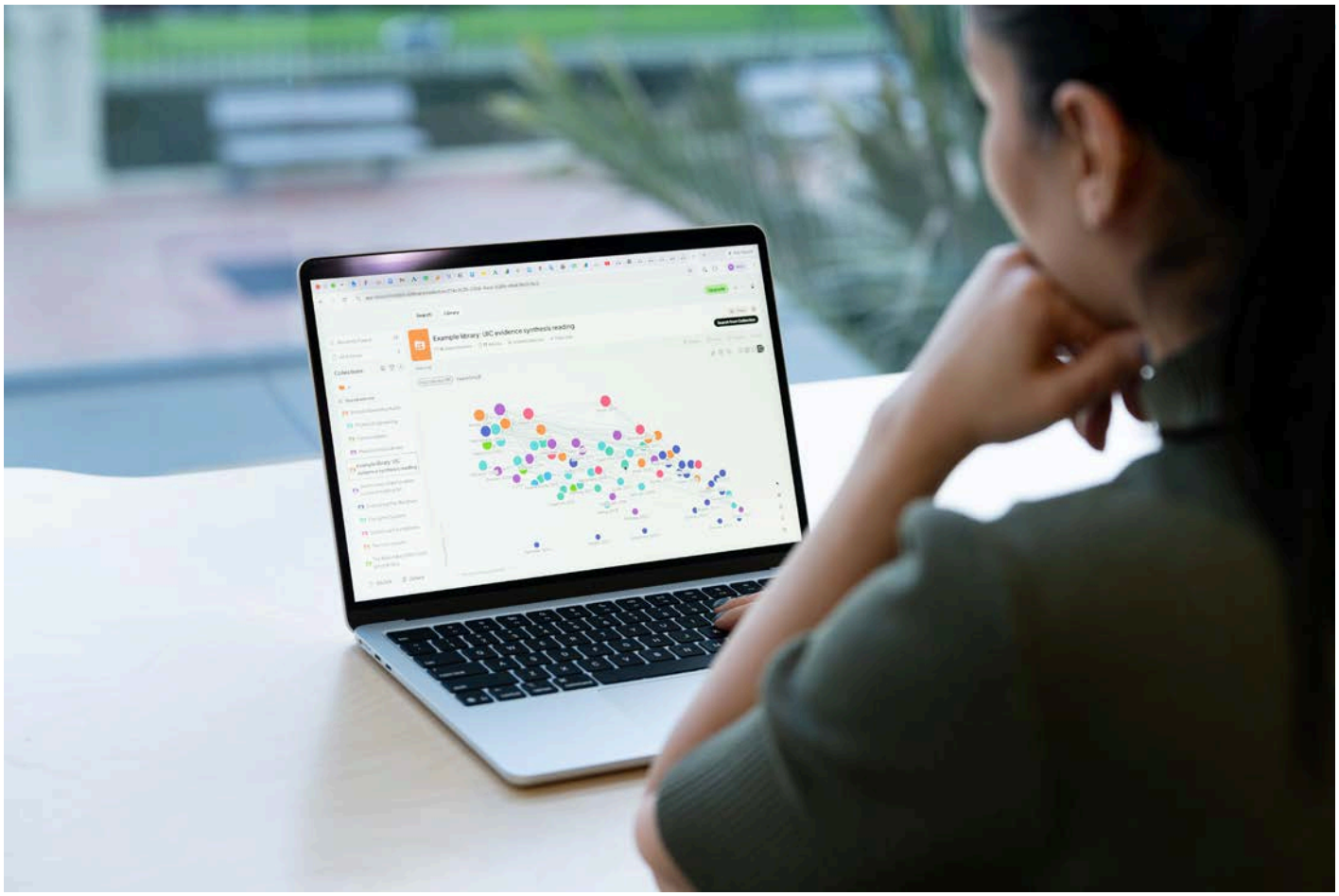
"Teams such as UniServices, Return on Science, and student groups such as Chiasma were massive along the way."

Although Litmaps was not formally spun out through UniServices, the founders tested



From left: Gayani Tennakoon, Axton Pitt, and Dan Erik Petersen.

> "We always had a commercial bent. We wanted to make it a lasting product, because if it was just a side project, it would go away and not get used by people."
>
> – Axton Pitt



Example of the Litmaps app interface.

their product with the team and drew on the experience of people in its network.

Axton also points to investors such as Icehouse Ventures, along with advisers, founders and companies that had already forged a path through New Zealand's tech start-up sector.

Participation in programmes such as the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship's Velocity $100k Challenge also contributed to an environment that encouraged entrepreneurial thinking, even when the team did not win.

"Being around all of those things makes you feel ambitious, that you can do things and make things happen," Axton says.

The question of trust

As Litmaps grows, responsible use of AI is becoming an important part of its value to researchers and institutions.

Axton is cautious about allowing the AI label to define the tool. At a time when the technology sector is rushing to add an AI tag to its products, Litmaps has opted to foreground what researchers can do with the platform.

"We're trying to focus on the users' problems rather than the technology," Axton says.

That philosophy drives the way AI is applied by the company. Coming before the current generative AI boom, Litmaps already took a cautious and deliberate approach to using the technology. Rather than scouring the internet to generate an entire literature review for the researcher, Litmaps uses AI within defined boundaries. A seed paper provides the starting point, while recommendations are grounded in the platform's corpus of scholarly records.

However, with the sheer volume of research being generated now and generative AI's ability to produce large volumes of credible-sounding text, the research sector is confronting new questions about quality and trust. Peer reviewers and journals are increasingly adopting screening tools to help determine whether something is reliable, and research platforms must consider how problems within the published record affect their recommendations.

Although Litmaps' recommendation tools can help sort through the large volume of publications, there is always a concern around the authenticity of those publications. "Sometimes the paper itself might be okay, but it might cite something that has been retracted," Axton says.

"We're currently in that space of exploring how we can surface warnings about retracted or potentially unreliable research."

Axton acknowledges, however, that Litmaps cannot develop every research-integrity capability itself and would need partnerships with specialist organisations to realise the state-of-the-art academic research tool.

Accelerating scientific impact

Litmaps' growth illustrates how a familiar research frustration can become the foundation of a global commercial venture. The platform's commercial impact lies partly in its ability to give scientists more time and a clearer view of the knowledge surrounding their work. Better research discovery could help people move more efficiently towards experiments, publications, products and new ventures.

"Ultimately, we want to lift the impact that researchers have on society," Axton says. His long-term ambition is for Litmaps to become the layer through which researchers interact with academic literature, making discovery more intuitive, engaging and useful.

"The mission for us," he says, "is to accelerate the scientific endeavour." ●



Growing a new era

Fascination with fungi inspires biotech startup.

When Dr Jess Chiang left Taiwan for New Zealand in 2016, entrepreneurship was not part of the plan. Driven by a deep connection with nature and animals, she imagined a future dedicated to environmental conservation. However, a budding fascination with fungi connected the two areas – transforming her from a curious science student into the founder of a cutting-edge biotechnology startup.

"It's been a long journey," says Jess, who did her bachelors and master's degrees in Biotechnology and Biomedical Science, "I can only really connect the dots now looking back."

Today, Jess is co-founder and CEO of Hyphera, a University of Auckland spinout developing fungi-based materials that could transform manufacturing, starting with the wood products sector and potentially extending as far as the aerospace industry.

A new era

The startup's name reflects its mission. "Hyphera means the era of hyphae," Jess explains.

> "We want to create a new era using fungi-based technology and replace petrochemicals where we can." – Dr Jess Chiang

Hyphae are microscopic thread-like structures that form mycelium, the underground network that makes up much of a fungus. Jess describes them as the fundamental building blocks of fungal systems.

The company's vision is straightforward but ambitious. "We want to create a new era using fungi-based technology and replace petrochemicals where we can," Jess says.

Hyphera emerged from the lessons learned during Jess's PhD (Biomedical/Biomaterial Science) research with BioFab, a company focused on mycelium-based materials. Despite promising technology, BioFab was liquidated in 2025 after facing commercial challenges.

However, the experience proved formative. "BioFab had run its course," Jess says. "But during my PhD I discovered things that went beyond what the technology could do there. It wasn't just about a fungi-based material that could replace Styrofoam, it was about what fungi can actually do."

Those discoveries prompted conversations with colleagues. While the company had ended, they believed the science pointed to new possibilities.

"We realised there was a lot more we wanted to do and a lot more impact we could make," says Jess.

Working closely with UniServices and exploring the commercial potential of her research, Jess began shaping the new venture with James Ferrier, co-founder of BioFab, now co-founder and CCO of Hyphera, and Gautam M Nair, co-founder and chief product officer for Hyphera. By the end of 2025, they had secured initial investment, identified a laboratory space at Outset Ventures, and laid the foundations for Hyphera.

"It's been quite a transition," she says. "A lot has happened in a relatively short amount of time."

Above: Mycelium, the underground network that makes up much of a fungus. Photo: iStock.com/Kichigin

Why fungi?

Rather than producing consumer products directly, Hyphera develops formulations that can be incorporated into existing manufacturing processes. Its first focus is adhesives and additives used in engineered wood products such as particleboard and medium-density fibreboard (MDF).

These products are typically manufactured using petroleum-derived resins that can release formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, and contribute to environmental waste at end-of-life.

Hyphera's fungal formulation aims to offer a renewable alternative while providing additional performance benefits.

"Our technology isn't just an adhesive," says Jess. "It's multifunctional. It has potential fire-retardant and water-repellent properties as well."



"My role now is understanding what's technically achievable while also understanding what customers and industry need ... It's about building a bridge between those two worlds."

– Dr Jess Chiang

Solving the scale problem

While mycelium-based materials have attracted growing global attention, commercialisation remains notoriously difficult in this area.

One of the biggest challenges Jess encountered during her PhD was speed.

A single experimental data point could take a month to generate. The process of growing and testing biological materials was laborious, making scale-up difficult and expensive.

"The growth of mycelium is amazing. The technology is incredible," she says. "But one sample could take a month to make from scratch."

The Hyphera team has developed a process that significantly accelerates production. Where previous approaches relied on growing mycelium through a material over several weeks, the company's new approach can achieve the binding process within hours. That leap in efficiency is central to Hyphera's strategy.

"If you're going to compete with plastics and synthetic chemicals, you have to understand the economics," Jess says. "We're not naïve about that. We've learned from previous experiences. This time we're much more realistic about scalability, cost, and what it takes to build and run a business."

Science meets entrepreneurship

Hyphera is currently raising a $1.6 million pre-seed round, and the company is still at a very early stage.

For Jess, the most significant transformation has been personal. Over the past few years, she has evolved from student to scientist to scientist-founder, learning to bridge the gap between research and industry.

"My role now is understanding what's technically achievable while also understanding what customers and industry need," she says. "It's about building a bridge between those two worlds."



Hyphera product samples.



Hyphera team – from left: James Ferrier, Dr Jess Chiang and Gautam M Nair.

That bridge was built on years of scientific curiosity. Jess recalls entering innovation competitions in 2018 with ideas about the multifunctional potential of fungi. At the time, the concepts were largely theoretical. Years later, while conducting doctoral research, she gathered the evidence she needed.

"I had a major moment in the lab when I realised something I'd hypothesised back in 2018 was actually true."

New Zealand ambition

Having spent years immersed in New Zealand's startup ecosystem, Jess believes that New Zealanders embody entrepreneurial ambition. Long before launching Hyphera, Jess took part in the University of Auckland's Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship's (CIE) Vanguard Expedition, Velocity Innovation Challenge and Hatchery programmes. As a teacher and mentor with innovation programmes including Momentum and Chiasma, she has worked closely with students and young innovators and startup founders.

"Kiwi ingenuity is real," she says. "What I see is creativity everywhere and that's where action starts."

She believes the country's greatest strengths are its creativity, authenticity, and willingness to tackle big problems despite its size.

"New Zealand is a small country, but it thinks globally. There are so many people who want to make a difference," she says. "Those ambitions need to be encouraged."

Looking ahead

The months ahead promise to be significant. While Hyphera seeks investment to accelerate development and bring its technology closer to market, Jess is preparing for another milestone: graduating with her PhD in December.

It's a moment that feels long overdue. "Life has already moved on," she jokes, and in many ways it has.

While the doctorate formalises years of scientific work, Jess is focused on the next challenge of transforming fungal biology into a new generation of sustainable materials.

The journey from student to CEO wasn't predictable, yet for someone inspired by nature from the moment she arrived in New Zealand, it feels like a fitting outcome.

"What I wanted to do was make a difference for the environment," she says. "Now I know that biotechnology is the way I can do it." ●

Below: Dr Jess Chiang speaking at the Aurora Climate Tech Summit in Wellington, July 2026.



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