

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) presents
Rethinking higher ed: Beyond {the buzzwords}
November 7-8, 2013
Sheraton Centre Toronto

Day One
November 7, 2013

Session 2B | Breaking the mold: Young entrepreneurs
Sharing their unique pathways, challenges and successes

Facilitator: Chris Martin, Public Policy Professional
Chris Olah, 2012 Thiel Fellowship Recipient
Brennan McEachran, HitSend

Chris Martin began the discussion by asking what factors contributed to the panelists' success, and what role the education system had played in that success.

Olah holds moderately negative views about his educational experience. One teacher in high school told him he wasn't intellectually mature enough to read higher level textbooks, while others discouraged him from auditing university classes while still in school, or working on open source software, because they claimed it would distract him from his studies. However, Hacklab Toronto and the U of T Mentorship Program were both very positive experiences, as was the Thiel Fellowship. Similarly, McEachran said he was bored in high school and channeled that energy into extra-curricular activities, including student council and being elected school president. Despite this boredom, he appreciated how keeping your doors open to opportunity was a key mantra at school, but arriving at university was the first time he had been told to close all those doors but one, in the form of specializing. McEachran was originally studying programming, but was so far ahead that he worked on business and entrepreneurship to learn how to make money from his skills. Nevertheless, he emphasized that he would not be at this stage if it wasn't for university.

The panelists were then asked about their experience of mentorship. McEachran was exposed to many different entrepreneurs at the Digital Media Zone. Coming from a small town meant that his previous experience of mentorship was mostly online, from Wikipedia and anonymous message boards, but this too proved valuable. Olah also made some key connections at U of T, including one professor who knew how to design his own microprocessor architecture. For him, peer mentorship is also important.

Finally, Martin asked how our universities are doing at fostering entrepreneurship. McEachran replied that universities are a good place for entrepreneurship because they are about freedom of inquiry, but the tension lies in how they try to contain the disruptive forces of entrepreneurship. By contrast, Olah said that he does not think universities should focus on entrepreneurship, because they tend to be more interested in business aspects.