

1 **Researching the role of the ‘Institutional Animateur’ at the Royal**  
2 **Agricultural University, Cirencester: The case of Farm491.**

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13  
14 **Abstract**

15 **Topic:** In contemporary entrepreneurship literature there is growing interest in both rural  
16 entrepreneurship and the emerging concept of the ‘Animateur’ in turning entrepreneurial ideas  
17 into realities. Traditionally, the ‘Animateur’ or ‘Animator’ has been considered to be like the  
18 entrepreneur, typically a lone individual, who works with and assists others to achieve an  
19 entrepreneurial outcome. Animateurs assist and encourage budding entrepreneurs by providing  
20 encouragement and experiential advice to those with an idea or vision, but do not have the  
21 necessary experience, skills or confidence to ‘go it alone’. The developing model of  
22 ‘Animateurial action’ differs from other forms of business support, because the animateurs are  
23 not providing the actual solutions in a report for a set fee but are guiding the aspiring  
24 entrepreneurs towards making the important decisions themselves on the path from ideation to  
25 commercialisation. Building on existing studies, this case study examines the role of the  
26 institutional animateur in driving an innovation ecosystem. Using narratives and examples  
27 from Farm491, the AgriTech incubator, accelerator and innovation space based at the Royal  
28 Agricultural University, Cirencester, UK, this scoping study expands the reach of the  
29 theoretical concept of animateurs to consider their role in agri-technology adoption within the  
30 land-based sector.

31 **Context:** Farm491 is a focal point for entrepreneurial activity that underpins the future of  
32 farming and food systems and delivers on the requirements of developing the rural economy  
33 (House of Lords, 2019). The Farm491 team consider 1) What do start-ups in the  
34 AgriTech/agrifood space actually want and need? 2) What level of knowledge do ‘aspiring  
35 entrepreneurs’ have about the AgriTech sector and terminology? 3) What is required to pull  
36 together the right talent in the team to provide holistic business support; and 4) Assess the  
37 animateurship offer to ensure it is realistic for start-ups and not overly extractive (Carr & Hill,  
38 2021). The team offer (virtual) mentoring, face-to-face flexible learning opportunities, via  
39 workshops and also access to a members’ only toolbox platform. As of early 2021, Farm491  
40 had 72 active members (of which 32% are current RAU students or RAU alumni); they have  
41 supported over 200 start-ups through membership and ERDF-funded workshops since starting,  
42 helped them raise, approx. £33million in investment and have helped them hire 120 new  
43 employees. Through the lens of animateurship, encompassing the role of the animateur and the  
44 construct of the process of animation, research can highlight how rural enterprise support  
45 contributes to business development, the levelling up agenda and supports the local and  
46 national industrial strategy.

47 **Applicability to the conference theme:** This working paper is applicable to the conference  
48 theme as it considers the importance of the emerging concept of the animateur by providing  
49 illustrated examples of institution-based animateurship. It places emphasis on the practical

50 aspects of institutional animateurship as well as informing the growing theoretical literature on  
51 how innovation ecosystems are positioned and then self-evolve.

52 **Aim:** The aim of the research is to examine what practices and processes of animateurship are  
53 applicable in institutional business support contexts. This study builds upon a growing interest  
54 in novel forms and applications of entrepreneurial activity and knowledge generation.

55 **Methodology:** Four sub-cases from successful entrepreneurial start-ups in regenerative  
56 agriculture, smart livestock farming, aquaculture and agronomy sectors are examined through  
57 an iterative comparative case analysis to provide novel insights into institutional animateurship.

58 **Contribution:** The research makes two contributions. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective,  
59 it extends the concept of, and literature on, animateurship from the focus primarily on the  
60 individual to the positioning of collective animateurship. Secondly, the study enriches our  
61 understanding of animateurial practices in the under-researched rural context.

62 **Implications for practice:** This research discusses in detail business support processes and  
63 pathways, offering practical insights for business support professionals.

64 **Research implications:** This study has important implications for business support practice  
65 because it adds to a neglected dimension to the literature of business support and has the  
66 potential to change how we view the practices and processes of animateurship.

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69

## 70 **Introduction.**

71 This working paper/scoping study reports on a pilot study of the Royal Agricultural University  
72 (RAU's) successful Farm491 incubator and accelerator programme in advance of a planned  
73 larger full-scale study of the programme to be conducted in 2022. This scoping study provides  
74 a particular opportunity for theory-building, bridging the literatures of rural entrepreneurship,  
75 animateurship and business incubation business support from both a theoretical and practical  
76 perspective. In contemporary entrepreneurship literature there is growing interest in both 'rural  
77 entrepreneurship' and the emerging concept of the 'animateur' in developing entrepreneurial  
78 ideas into realities (Smith, 2012; Annibal, Liddle & McElwee, 2013; McElwee, Smith &  
79 Sommerville, 2018; Kubinowski, 2019; Jack, Frondigoun & Smith, 2020; Kennedy, 2021).  
80 Traditionally, the 'animateur' (to give it its French origin) or 'animator' (as the activity is  
81 universally known) has been considered to be like the entrepreneur, typically the activities of  
82 an individual who works with and assists others to achieve an entrepreneurial outcome  
83 (McElwee, Smith & Sommerville, 2018). Indeed, so-called animateurs assist budding  
84 entrepreneurs by providing encouragement and experiential advice to those who have an idea  
85 or vision, but do not have the necessary experience or confidence to 'go it alone' (Smith, 2012).  
86 Interestingly, in the UK based studies of Smith and McElwee (see above) the 'animators' or  
87 'animateurs' interviewed were predominantly female, which suggests that there may well be  
88 gender specific aspect to the behaviour. Whilst entrepreneurship is centred upon "the creation  
89 and extraction of value from an environment" (Anderson, 1995) by an individual or team, the  
90 focus of the activity within Farm491 is based upon developing the self-efficacy and agency of  
91 the entrepreneurial individuals themselves. Animation, as a process, revolves around the giving  
92 of time and experience to enable an entrepreneur to succeed and achieve their personal and  
93 business ambitions. Thus, the developing model of animateurship differs from other forms of  
94 business support, because the animateurs are not providing the actual solutions, but instead are  
95 guiding the aspiring entrepreneurs towards making the important decisions themselves on the  
96 path from ideation to commercialisation (Manning et al., 2020).

97  
98 In recent years, there has been a rise in interest the concept of 'animating' of activities and  
99 'animation' in a European context. This applies particularly to French and Polish scholarship  
100 in which animateurship is being developed as a pedagogy in its own right (Kubinowski, 2019).  
101 According to Kubinowski, there are multiple "loops" accompanying the constitution of this  
102 relatively new pedagogical subdiscipline. Indeed, they argue this emerging discipline has  
103 significant educational, social, cultural and economic potential, but whilst of value, the Polish  
104 pedagogy of animating activities is little known around the world and as a result needs further  
105 exploration in different contexts.

106  
107 The genesis of this working paper began in early 2021 when the first two authors presented a  
108 case study of the Farm491 programme to an audience at a seminar on rural entrepreneurship  
109 run virtually by ISBE (see Carr & Hill, 2021). After the presentation, a lively discussion ensued  
110 relating to the actual processes conducted by the Farm491 team. In this conversation it was  
111 'mooted' that as well as the traditional advising, consulting, mentoring and teaching aspects of  
112 incubation work, a special form of 'institutional animateurship' may also be in play.  
113 Institutional animateurship in this context extends beyond discussions on the extensive  
114 exploration of entrepreneurial university (see Manning, 2018; Manning & Parrott, 2018). The  
115 Farm491 team, within the context of a university setting, facilitate the success of members  
116 through an operational model that develops an innovation ecosystem of knowledge and skills  
117 sharing with multiple stakeholders. Indeed, the processes employed can be framed as an  
118 example of 'animation.'

119

120 In recent years there has been an increase in interest in relation to business accelerators,  
121 incubators and hubs (see Bone, Gonzalez-Uribe, Haley, & Lahr, 2019; Tomaney & Bradley  
122 2007; Youtie & Shapira, 2008; Fuzi, 2015; Roberts & Townsend, 2015; Bosworth, Price,  
123 Collison & Fox, 2020; Cowie, Townsend, & Salemink, 2020; Rundel, Salemink & Strijker,  
124 2020). Although Farm491 is labelled as an incubator/accelerator/hub, none of these terms  
125 adequately describes the actual operations and ways of working to facilitate the client business  
126 development, hence the importance of this study.

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128

## 129 **Literature review**

130

### 131 **Introduction**

132

133 This review considers the extant literature on animateurship, an emerging field, the  
134 characteristics of incubators, hubs and accelerators in the context of providing business support  
135 for early stage and start-up businesses. The review then positions the concept of animateurship  
136 within the innovation ecosystem, using a framework derived from existing literature.

137

### 138 **Business support via Incubators/Accelerators:**

139 The literature on business acceleration and incubation is eclectic, fragmented and evolving,  
140 with the majority of studies being carried out in the United States (US) (Bone, Gonzalez-Uribe,  
141 Haley, & Lahr, 2019). One reason is that business support practice via accelerators as a process  
142 is developing so quickly, that academic research cannot keep pace with the innovations as they  
143 happen (Bone, Allen, & Haley, 2017; Bagnoli, Massaro, Ruzza & Toniolo, 2020). Dee et al.,  
144 (2015) suggest business incubation is a summative term subsuming business start-up and  
145 growth support, utilising mentoring, skills training, and business support to develop both  
146 business founders and the new venture. The most important differences between incubation  
147 and acceleration are that accelerators follow a programme of support that is limited in duration  
148 and aiming to speed up growth development (Bone, Allen, & Haley, 2017). Businesses  
149 participating in acceleration have already established the foundations of the business such as  
150 strategy, or operational activities (Sepulveda, 2012), but may be seeking mentoring,  
151 networking opportunities and access to funding. Forming links with venture capitalists and  
152 angel investors, is important to catalyse business acceleration and can occur via formal  
153 structures or informal networks (Vandeweghe & Fu, 2018).

154

155 Incubators are shared workspaces with possibly individual offices that can be used for an  
156 unlimited time, dependent on the business model. Shared facilities, training, mentoring and  
157 business support and access to investors form an essential part of the entrepreneurial  
158 ecosystem. By inference those professionals working in incubators and accelerators may  
159 require different knowledge and skills to facilitate businesses appropriately.

160 Findings on the impact of business incubation are still emerging. Existing studies differ  
161 widely in their relevance for the UK, and few were conducted in rural areas. As goals vary  
162 widely for business incubation and acceleration, so do the methodologies applied. Selected  
163 studies seem to indicate that impact includes increased firm growth measured by number of  
164 employees (Lasrado et al., 2016). However, there is contrasting evidence for effects on survival  
165 rates, as some studies suggest an increase, others a decrease in viability; the latter may indeed  
166 be a positive result, if non-viable firms stop trading (Bone, Gonzalez-Uribe, Haley, & Lahr,  
167 2019).

168

169 Business support for rural businesses (particularly AgriTech) is considered to be a niche area.  
170 Indeed, Price, Shutt and Sellick (2018) identify common features of business support that bring  
171 about the greatest benefits to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in rural areas. They  
172 found that the provision of business support per se in rural areas is declining and that the best  
173 solutions were provided by tailored interventions, as opposed to the dissemination of generic  
174 business advice.  
175

176 **Business Hubs:** According to the Cambridge Dictionary a ‘hub’ is “the central or main part of  
177 something where there is most activity”. Bosworth and Salemink (2021) consider that the  
178 concept of ‘hubs’ is proliferating and becoming pervasive in the literatures of entrepreneurship  
179 and regional development (Price, Shutt & Sellick, 2018; Rundel, Salemink & Strijker, 2020)  
180 and is migrating from urban to rural usages. However, the term is not used consistently across  
181 different industries and domains. Business hubs generate different applications, benefits and  
182 complementarities to their users. Nevertheless, according to Bosworth and Salemink, in rural  
183 settings a new wave of business hubs are emerging with very distinctive functions,  
184 organisational structures, social and physical characteristics. They acknowledge the links  
185 between local development and human capital (Tomaney & Bradley, 2007), urban hubs are  
186 initiated as a result of entrepreneurial opportunity creation and/or public sector and social  
187 enterprise. Their typology extends to transport & mobility hubs; digital hubs; technology hubs;  
188 creative hubs/arts hubs; innovation hubs; business incubators; co-working hubs, community  
189 hubs, artisanal business trails and ‘third places’ (Bosworth & Salemink, 2021). These rural  
190 hubs often bridge economic, social and community objectives.  
191

#### 192 **Accessing the literature on Animatorship.**

193  
194 The concept of ‘Animatorship’ has been around for the past decade in community development  
195 circles and in the literature of community-based entrepreneurship. Indeed, Mager (2000) in a  
196 strategy report for neighbourhood renewal highlighted the importance of the role of  
197 ‘animateurship’ in stimulating regeneration and renewal, a contemporary focus in land use  
198 policy and the reshaping of the agricultural economy. However, in the last decade the concept  
199 of animateurship has slowly evolved and its use has gained traction in the entrepreneurship  
200 literature (see Smith, 2012; Annibal, Liddle & McElwee, 2013; McElwee, Smith &  
201 Sommerville, 2018; Jack, Frondigoun & Smith, 2020; and Kennedy, 2021). What is significant  
202 about these studies is that they are all set in rural and small community contexts or  
203 communities-of-practice [CoP] (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where the underpinning  
204 entrepreneurial action has developed organically. A CoP is a group of people who share a  
205 concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact  
206 regularly (Wenger, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). The  
207 study of Smith (2012) documents the successes of the Buchan Development Partnership in  
208 Aberdeenshire, Scotland in animating entrepreneurial activity and establishing numerous social  
209 enterprises and community organisations. Similarly, Annibal, Liddle, and McElwee (2013)  
210 investigates the activities of animators in three villages in Lincolnshire and analysed the  
211 ‘ground-up’, organic processes in play within village community-based organisations and  
212 committees.  
213

214 The work of McElwee, Smith & Sommerville, (2018) examines similar processes in village  
215 based social enterprise projects in England and Scotland participating in the Government  
216 funded Village SOS project. Jack, Frondigoun & Smith’s (2020) study the ground-up approach  
217 of a community in a small Scottish town who worked in partnership with a Police Inspector to  
218 bring about behavioural changes in a formerly criminogenic area. The Inspector was paid by

219 Police Scotland but as a part of his role advised, mentored and encouraged members of the  
 220 community to help and facilitate change by setting up projects designed, planned by and within  
 221 the communities. What unites all of these animatureal examples is that the animators do not  
 222 directly deliver the outcomes themselves (although this would often have been easier and  
 223 quicker), but use their experience and expertise to enable active members of a given community  
 224 to ‘do it for themselves’ and thereby develop a sense of community pride and ownership in the  
 225 collective experience and outcomes. Kennedy (2021) explores the ‘benevolent’ practices of a  
 226 team of community focused entrepreneurs in a rural community in America to develop and  
 227 transform the civic wealth within an already entrepreneurial community. Their processes  
 228 revolve around identifying key players and assisting them by advising, encouraging and  
 229 mentoring them to set up their businesses in the community and by offering rented commercial  
 230 property at a discounted rate when it would have made more commercial sense to rent it at  
 231 market value.

232  
 233 Kennedy (2021) describes how the team successful leveraged their ‘relationships’ to:  
 234 “...develop a shared vision and invest complementary assets to re-build a defunct cotton mill  
 235 and form an entrepreneurial community around it to create civic wealth through the creation  
 236 of opportunities of others and curation of the space.”  
 237

238 Kennedy (2021) considers the dual roles played by the team as animators and entrepreneurs.  
 239 Importantly, Kennedy highlights that the entrepreneurs in the team consciously shifted between  
 240 their roles as entrepreneurs and animators as and when required and invested a considerable  
 241 amount of their time and energy in developing and maintaining their relationships with nascent  
 242 entrepreneurs in the community. This focus on the importance of relationships is a key theme  
 243 which runs through and unites the studies described above - see table 1 below:  
 244

| Processual (Continuum) Spiritual State |                             |                      |  |
|--|-----------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Activity- Activism                     | Act-Action-Activity-Advice. | Directiveness        | Animated Spirit – Community Spiritedness |
| Philosophy                             | Collaboration               | Empathy              | Empowerment                              |
| Quality                                | Consultation                | Openness             | Motivation                               |
| Conversation?                          | Engagement                  | Vigorousness         | Manipulation                             |
| Mindset?                               | Organisation                | Tenacity             | Enlightened                              |
| Listening                              | Orchestration               | Self-Efficacy        | Inspiration                              |
| Experiential                           | Direct                      | Versatility          | Emotional Appeals                        |
| Relationship-building                  | Prioritisation              | Perseverance         | Visionary                                |
| An Art Form?                           | Facilitation                | Supportiveness       | Focussed                                 |
| Education-Pedagogy                     | Stimulation                 | Flexibility          | Enlivenment                              |
|  | Partnership-Working         | Trusted intermediary |  |
|  | Virtuosity                  | Ideation             |  |
|  | Brokerage                   | Intuition            |  |
|  | Arbitrage                   | Confidence           |  |
|  | Bricolage                   | Patience             |  |
|  | Provocation                 | Creativity           |  |
|  | Mentoring                   | Innovation           |  |
|  | Managing                    |                      |  |
|  | Enabling                    |                      |  |
|  | Leadership                  |                      |  |
|  | Mobilisation                |                      |  |
|  | Integration                 |                      |  |

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246 In Smith (2012) and Annibal, Liddle, and McElwee (2013) the term ‘animateurship’ is used  
247 consciously to distinguish and differentiate this context in an entrepreneurial setting but  
248 ‘Animateurship’ and ‘Animatorship’ are basically the same process. In Smith (2012) the  
249 animateurship documented arose from the community based entrepreneurial activity of a  
250 Council funded programme to boost community activism and enterprise in village and rural  
251 settings. The animateurs in this article were paid council employees but selected for their  
252 experience in community learning and passion in helping community activism. Similarly, in  
253 Annibal, Liddle, and McElwee (2013) the setting is also in a village context. Importantly, for  
254 these authors their animateurs are self-selected ‘voices’ indicating that animateurs can come  
255 from a broad spectrum of settings. This work highlights the two aspects of animateurship: the  
256 animator(s), the individual(s) that enables animation and animation itself, the process by which  
257 the facilitation role is enacted and delivered. From an analysis of the work of Smith (2012)  
258 and McElwee, Smith & Sommerville (2017/2018) it is possible to create a taxonomy of skills,  
259 behaviours, traits and states associated with animateurial action: See Table 1. These are  
260 explored more fully in this paper.

261

### 262 **Animateurship in the context of the innovation ecosystem.**

263 De Vasconcelos Gomes, Facin, Salerno and Ikenami (2018, p.30) position that “the innovation  
264 ecosystem construct has emerged as a promising approach in the literature on strategy,  
265 innovation and entrepreneurship.... business ecosystem relates mainly to value capture, while  
266 innovation ecosystem relates mainly to value creation.” They analyse the innovation ecosystem  
267 in terms of the main focus, the agents and the coordination mechanisms. These three aspects  
268 are considered in this working paper as animateurship, animateurs and animation respectively.  
269 Dedehayir, Mäkinen and Ortt (2018) describe aspects of animation, without using the term,  
270 within an innovation ecosystem, namely governance, forging of partnerships, platform  
271 management, and value management. They also consider the role of a range of actors in  
272 developing the innovation ecosystem. The findings of this research are synthesized into a  
273 theoretical framework (Table 2) to inform the research described in this working paper.  
274 Essential within its development is that animateurship within an innovation ecosystem contains  
275 two types of activity animation activities and activities associated with the role of the  
276 animateur.

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**Table 2. Animateurship within an innovation ecosystem (Adapted from Dedeheyir et al., 2018).**

|  | Animateurship within an innovation ecosystem   |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | Animation activities   | Animateur activities   |
| <b>Governance:</b><br>initiates, maintains, and develops ecosystem functionality                   | Designing the roles of ecosystem actors<br>Coordinating internal and external interactions<br>Orchestrating resource flows between partners<br>Assembling components, materials and services to deliver functionality.<br>Processing information supplied by all actors in the ecosystem to enhance functionality                                  |  |
| <b>Forging partnerships:</b><br>Creates a network  | Attracting and gathering relevant partners together<br>Forming links and alliances with organisations who have access to various resources<br>Creating collaboration between parties through alliances<br>Stimulating complementary investments and providing opportunities for niche creation<br>Sharing information to enhance network capacity. |  |
| <b>Platform management:</b><br>Provides technical basis for ecosystem to function                  | Designing and building a platform and place<br>Initial platform, data, and infrastructure to build user-community and enhance value for network actors<br>Orchestrating complementor innovations to align with platform  |  |
| <b>Value management:</b><br>Creating and capturing value   | Bundling offerings and supplied components of the service delivery (information, technology access)<br>Stimulating value appropriation for all actors<br>Developing multi-actor engagement to define a problem or need, develop ideas, engage in activities to address the need.   |  |
|  |  |  |
| <b>Expert (academic)</b><br>Supports and creates value by  |  | Generating knowledge from research and applied research<br>Providing consultation, expertise, and advice<br>Encouraging technology transfer and commercialisation                      |
| <b>Expert (business)</b> Supports and creates value by   |  | Providing consultation, expertise, and advice<br>Encouraging technology transfer and commercialisation   |
| <b>Facilitator</b> Supports innovation ecosystem construction and operation by                     |  | Building connections and alliances between actors<br>Interacting between partners and sub-groups<br>Providing access to local and nonlocal markets                                     |
| <b>Entrepreneur</b> Supports venture creation by   |  | Co-locating with others<br>Developing a focused network of staff, suppliers, customers, and other actors<br>Coordinating collaboration between research and commercialisation partners |
| <b>Sponsor</b> Supports value creation and the innovation ecosystem by                             |  | Providing resources to entrepreneurs;<br>Purchasing and co-developing offerings of firms<br>Linking entrepreneurs to other ecosystem actors  |
| <b>Regulator</b> Supports entrepreneurial activity and opening avenues for ecosystem emergence by: |  | Providing economic and political reform<br>Minimising regulatory restrictions<br>Enabling enterprise and innovation  |

301



302 The theoretical framework (Table 2) will be used to inform the methodological phase of the  
303 research.

304

## 305 **Methodology.**

306 To meet the aim of this scoping study, this research applied a case study strategy. Explanatory  
307 case study analysis consists of the following steps: (a) a clear account of the facts associated  
308 with the case (Farm491), (b) reflection on the alternative explanation of the facts and (c) the  
309 formation of a conclusion based on the appropriate explanation of the findings (Yin 1981,  
310 2002). The explanatory approach means that findings cannot be generalised, but they can  
311 provide the basis for new thinking and theory (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). Ragin (1992)  
312 describes the case study approach as emergent, interpretivist and a process of casing i.e., an  
313 illustrative examination of what the case and sub-cases are typical of, through the use of  
314 systematic combining to inform problematisation (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), rather than looking  
315 at fixed, bounded cases specific to a given time and place (Piekkari, Welsh & Paavilainen,  
316 2009; Dubois & Salmi, 2016; Manning & Kowalska, 2021). This kind of approach leads to a  
317 more holistic enquiry that is both exploratory and explanatory (Yin, 1993; 2018).

318

319 We present and discuss four sub-cases within the case study demonstrating successful  
320 acceleration of business start-ups emanating from Farm491. The authors are all associated with  
321 the RAU. The first author Sarah Carr is Head of Farm491, the second author Inge Hill is Head  
322 of Rural Economy research at the RAU and a former business growth adviser on government  
323 funded UK programmes; the third author Louise Manning is Director of Knowledge Exchange  
324 at the RAU; the fourth author Robert Smith is an independent scholar involved in multiple  
325 research collaborations with the RAU. The first three authors have individually and collectively  
326 supported students and RAU alumni to start and develop their own businesses both during their  
327 time studying at RAU and after graduation. This is an important element of the study and of  
328 the methodology because all authors have a proven track record in animating the successful  
329 entrepreneurial activities of others. In this study, four successful start-ups (in regenerative  
330 agriculture, smart livestock farming, aquaculture and agronomy) are considered to inform the  
331 conceptualisation of animateurs and animation in this context utilising the theoretical  
332 framework (Table 2).

333

334 The narrative literature review follows a snowball, iterative academic literature review  
335 approach (Kowalska & Manning, 2020). The raw data consists of discussions with Farm491  
336 staff, analytical reflexive discussions between the author team, assessment of Farm491 data,  
337 and publicly available information, company websites and social media. The data collection  
338 started in summer 2020 and is ongoing. The case-based evidence is purposively collated and  
339 analysed in the case narrative and in the case synthesis matrix (Table 3). The potential for  
340 evidence selection bias is considered when presenting the findings, discussion and conclusion  
341 sections.

342

## 343 **Findings**

344

### 345 **The case: Farm491**

346 Farm491 is a UK agri-technology incubator, accelerator and innovation space focused on  
347 entrepreneurial activity that underpins the future of farming and food systems and delivers on  
348 the requirements of developing the rural economy (House of Lords, 2019; Manning et al.,  
349 2020). It is important to stress that Farm491 is an AgriTech incubator and innovation space for  
350 entrepreneurs focused on the future of food and farming. It is also of importance that Farm491

351 is physically based at and owned by the Royal Agricultural University (RAU) and that the  
352 incubation centre works with AgriTech and AgriFood entrepreneurs through all stages of their  
353 ideation through to commercialisation journey. This makes the RAU the principal stakeholder  
354 in the partnership. The facility was opened in late 2016 with local enterprise partnership  
355 (GFirst), ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) and match funding from the RAU.  
356 The full team was recruited and came together in early 2018 to kick start the project. To date,  
357 Farm491 has supported over 200 start-up companies through membership and ERDF-funded  
358 workshops, helped them to raise £33 millions of investment and created 120 new jobs which  
359 is a phenomenal achievement by any standards. As of early 2021, Farm491 had 72 active  
360 members (of which 32% are current RAU students or alumni). Through analysing the stories  
361 below, it can be demonstrated how the ‘lens of the animateur’ can highlight more effectively  
362 how rural enterprise support contributes to the levelling up agenda and supports the industrial  
363 strategy (NICRE, 2021; Carr & Hill, 2021).

364  
365 Farm491 fits the criteria of an economic and cultural hub as well as a ‘new wave hub’ with  
366 very distinctive functions, organisational structures, social and physical characteristics and the  
367 interconnections with the rural economy and society. The Farm491 venture is a hybrid cross  
368 between a technology hub, digital hub, innovation hub, co-working hub, creative hub, and a  
369 business incubator and accelerator. The building from which it operates also contains a Local  
370 Enterprise Partnership (GFirst) Growth Hub; thus, collectively the facility has aspects of a  
371 ‘community hub’ in a wider network of growth hubs serving economic and business functions  
372 in Gloucestershire, UK. In the Farm491 venture, there is an obvious overlap between economic  
373 and social motivations. Farm491 has evolved its mode of service delivery and the associated  
374 support mechanisms for its users and demonstrates, through its association with, and its  
375 situation on a university campus, a mode of institutional animateurship. Hence, it is of interest  
376 to consider the interaction between animateurs and processes of animation and how access to  
377 resources, knowledge, skills and know-how are disseminated and promulgated. Farm491 has a  
378 wide range of facilities and functions which serve alumni and different groups of society with  
379 different needs.

380  
381 The Head of Farm491 has a key ‘Antimateurial’ role, however, the Centre and Events Manager  
382 through displaying behaviours of partnership-working and collaboration via a calendar of  
383 relevant events for Farm491 members to engage in also supports institutional animateurship.  
384 These events can range from business support workshops such as developing intellectual  
385 property strategies or investor sessions through to popular community-style networking events  
386 such as summer and Christmas socials which bring the expanded Farm491 network closer  
387 together. Members also co-develop showcase events and knowledge sharing sessions. This role  
388 is supported by the Centre Coordinator who acts as ‘front-of-house’ facilitator for all new  
389 members by ensuring their important ‘on-boarding’ process is smooth and any issues during  
390 their membership are dealt with in a timely manner. This of course further helps the start-ups  
391 themselves to run efficient businesses. The role of the Farm491 team as a whole, is to inspire,  
392 motivate and empower entrepreneurs to grow their ideas into viable businesses within the  
393 AgriTech and AgriFood sector.

394 Members of Farm491 can receive support in two ways. The first is through membership. This  
395 includes one-to-one business support with a suite of expert business advisors, introductions to  
396 investors, academics and various other stakeholders, invitations to exclusive events and  
397 promotion across the Farm491 network. This support is delivered both online (for those not  
398 local to Cirencester) and face-to-face. Support at the physical hub includes hot-desking

399 facilities, office space and workshop units. This flexible resourcing capability as a form of  
400 animation is one of the key reasons behind Farm491’s success. Importantly, Farm491  
401 membership can be accessed across the world, with current members based across the UK and  
402 internationally in Australia, the US, Africa and India. The second form of support is delivered  
403 through the Inspiring AgriTech Innovation programme, 12 hours of ERDF funded workshops,  
404 specifically for Gloucestershire-based businesses. This programme helps early-stage  
405 entrepreneurs in Gloucestershire to develop a lean business plan and customer value  
406 proposition. Farm491 is now considered one of the top UK AgriTech accelerators for early-  
407 stage start-ups and have exciting plans for future growth.

## 408 **Exploring the sub-cases through the animateurship lens**

409 In this section we introduce and present four Farm491 member stories before analysing and  
410 discussing them in context in the remainder of the paper. The stories are cross-analysed in the  
411 case synthesis matrix (Table 3).

412

413 **Case 1 - Gentle Farming:** ‘Gentle Farming’ was founded by Thomas Gent (entrepreneur), an  
414 arable farmer on the Lincolnshire Cambridgeshire border who has been farming in a  
415 regenerative way for around 12 years. Thomas joined Farm491 in 2020, during the global  
416 pandemic. During this time, he had made some observations such as how his regeneratively  
417 farmed grain was to use his own words “tipped into the same pile as everyone else’s and the  
418 huge amount of press coverage around how damaging agriculture is to the environment”. He  
419 had noticed that no one was talking about the potential that agriculture has to be a part of the  
420 climate change solution. Thomas wanted farmers to gain rewards and recognition for using  
421 regenerative practises on their farms. In the early stages of membership, the focus for Gentle  
422 Farming’s support through Farm491 was to build their network (forging partnerships) and  
423 promote the business (value management). This was achieved through facilitating a number of  
424 introductions (forging partnerships and facilitator role).

425

426 What was perhaps the most beneficial engagement was Thomas’s application to Farm491’s  
427 Challenge Prize competition “Digging for Innovation”, in late 2020<sup>1</sup>. Farm491’s role here was  
428 one of a sponsor supporting value creation and innovation ecosystem development, Thomas  
429 was awarded the prize and with this was exposed to some influential soil experts (expert  
430 academic and expert business) and an even wider farming audience<sup>2</sup>. Before winning, Thomas  
431 was the only team member working with just 2 farms with no partnerships in place. After the  
432 prize win, Gentle Farming became a team of 4, working directly with around 40 UK farms with  
433 over 300 having expressed an interest for next season. They are soon to issue over 10,000  
434 carbon certificates in the UK and over 50,000 across Europe. They have developed some key  
435 partnerships across the industry including Corteva, the Farming Forum and Dutch company  
436 Agreeena (formerly commodicarbon)<sup>3</sup>.

437

438 Due to Thomas’s passion and drive he was offered the role of Head of Sales for Agreeena, so  
439 with this came the challenge of hiring someone to manage the farmer support within Gentle  
440 Farming. Farm491 shared the job vacancy widely in their network. This proved fruitful as  
441 Thomas successfully hired an RAU graduate to take on the role.

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<sup>1</sup> Farm491, Digging for Innovation: a Challenge Prize by Farm491 and BASF, <https://farm491.com/digging-for-innovation/>

<sup>2</sup> Farm491, Digging for Innovation: Challenge Prize Winner Announced, <https://farm491.com/2021/01/22/digging-for-innovation-winner/>

<sup>3</sup> Gentle Farming, powered by Agreeena, <https://www.gentle-farming.co.uk/>

442

443 **Case 2. Land Ocean Farm:** ‘Land Ocean Farm’ aims to produce *Litopenaeus Vannamei*  
444 (Whitelegged Shrimp) in a land based and biosecure environment using a recirculating  
445 aquaculture system. Their goal is to champion sustainable aquaculture in the UK reducing  
446 dependency on foreign import and reduce pressure on natural sources. Land Ocean Farm is  
447 based in Cheltenham (entrepreneur) and the team have strong experience as local restaurateurs.  
448 The founders, Litu and Rasel, have worked in various eatery and retail supply chains in the UK  
449 for over a decade.

450

451 Litu and Rasel formed the business in 2020 and soon joined Farm491 as virtual members, after  
452 being referred by a business consultant (sponsor) who has worked closely with Farm491 for 3  
453 years delivering the ERDF funded (regulator) Inspiring AgriTech Innovation Programme<sup>4</sup>.  
454 Regular business support meetings with Sarah in the early stages focussed on deciding the  
455 businesses’ key priorities. Initial introductions were made to RAU academic colleagues and  
456 the possibility of applying for a grant alongside the RAU was explored. Unfortunately, the  
457 RAU’s expertise did not align with business’s needs and another introduction was made to an  
458 external professor in the wider RAU research network (expert academic) who gave the team  
459 further inspiration and drive to push their idea forwards.

460

461 Sarah suggested that Land Ocean Farm join their ERDF-funded Inspiring AgriTech Innovation  
462 [acceleration] programme to further develop business tools such as developing a clear customer  
463 value proposition (value management) and a production and commercialisation strategy. From  
464 the programme, it was clear that the founders needed investment, a well-developed business  
465 plan, and further industry contacts (facilitator). Sarah made an introduction to an organisation  
466 who specifically focus on helping AgriFoodTech start-ups to raise investment and the contact  
467 here has helped Litu and Rasel to develop an investment proposition. They are now in a position  
468 to gain better value from the introductions made by Farm491’s Business Advisors (facilitator  
469 role) and are benefitting from further business promotion being generated by Farm491’s  
470 external PR and marketing firm who are currently writing a case study on the business.

471

472 **Case 3. Agri Frontier:** Agri Frontier is an agri investment and agri-business advisory firm  
473 (entrepreneur) specialised in helping create world class farming and integrated agribusinesses  
474 across the value chain, with a focus on frontier markets, particularly Africa. Agri Frontier  
475 works to provide innovative solutions and true value-added services to investors, and  
476 businesses operating in the Agri sector in diverse environments and situations. Typical clients  
477 range from family owned to corporate farming businesses in Africa as well as Impact,  
478 Developmental and Private Equity investors. The firm is purposely specialised in terms of  
479 sector and geography, allowing them to provide a comprehensive solution to the agri-business  
480 sector and its different participants. They have a depth of knowledge and experience that is  
481 unrivalled, allowing them to add-value from the field to the boardroom<sup>5</sup>.

482

483 Agri Frontier became a virtual member of Farm491 in Jan 2019, moving to a full-time resident  
484 member in July 2019 (platform management). Farm491 assisted with the very first hire in May  
485 2019, a post graduate student of the RAU. Agri Frontier also provided work experience taking  
486 on an intern in 2021 from the BSc Agri Business Management course at the RAU (value  
487 management). Since joining Farm491, Agri Frontier has grown from the sole founder to a team  
488 of 7, as well as having subsidiary offices in East Africa (Kenya) and West Africa (Nigeria) and

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<sup>4</sup> Farm491’s ERDF funded Inspiring AgriTech Innovation Programme, <https://farm491.com/iai/>

<sup>5</sup> Agri Frontier, <http://agrifrontier.com/>

489 are currently recruiting to expand the team further. Farm491 has facilitated Agri Frontier to  
490 establish a consortium with the RAU to submit bids for funds to support the establishment of  
491 an Agri Growth Hub in East Africa (expert academic, expert business, forging partnerships).  
492 The consortium applied for an Innovate UK<sup>6</sup> grant to develop this plan however was  
493 unsuccessful with the first submission. Farm491 will work with Agri Frontier to apply for  
494 further funding in the future. Other introductions and connection forged by Farm491 included  
495 with the Department of International Trade (DIT) following a DIT visit to Farm491 and who  
496 are now also assisting Agri Frontier with their international growth plans (facilitator, regulator).  
497 This example shows the animateurship reach informing local and national breadth of the  
498 animation activities at Farm491 in terms both public and private stakeholders. The importance  
499 of working with the local enterprise partnership to develop the Gloucestershire Draft Local  
500 Industrial Strategy shows the wide breadth of Farm491's animateurship reach informing local  
501 and national policy processes.

502

503 **Case 4. Breedr:** Breedr, founded by Ian Wheal, (entrepreneur) is a precision livestock  
504 company who have developed a app that is freely available for farmers to be able to log births,  
505 weights, movements and medications, whilst also being able to weigh their cattle in 10 seconds  
506 with their Crush Mode feature. Within the management tool, they have predictive growth tools  
507 which allow farmers to develop and hone management practices to produce cattle with better  
508 margins and less waste. Ian started Breedr with the simple aim of helping farmers like his  
509 parents to prove the quality of their livestock to improve their returns<sup>7</sup>.

510

511 Breedr first engaged with Farm491 at the start of 2018 during their very first Inspiring  
512 AgriTech Innovation workshop (funded by ERDF) (regulator). The founder, Ian, used the time  
513 within the programme to develop a customer value proposition and strategy on how to grow  
514 the business (value management). Thanks to Ian's entrepreneurial flare and engagement with  
515 the product from farmers early on, he grew the business and joined Farm491 as a virtual  
516 member in January 2019 (platform management) whilst also engaging with RAU academics to  
517 run trials at the University's farm (expert academics). The business took advantage of the range  
518 of networking and skills development events that Farm491 hosted, including their AgriTech  
519 showcase in April 2019 which was attended by over 200 people which created new contacts  
520 for the business (governance, forging partnerships, facilitator). Breedr raised £2.2 millions of  
521 investment and went from 4 permanent employees in January 2019 to a team of 24 as of  
522 September 2021 (sponsor). With a larger team, Breedr have now upgraded their membership  
523 with Farm491 to Flexible, which means they have access to larger meeting rooms and event  
524 space to host both their team meetings and farmer meetings. This change in service uptake  
525 shows the role the innovation ecosystem at Farm491 still plays in animating the further  
526 development of the business.

527

528 On working with Farm491, Ian has stated, "We've found Farm491 to be an exciting community  
529 of AgriTech start-ups, with great support from the University to help boost our business during  
530 the critical start-up phase. Farm491 had been a key part of supporting the business through the  
531 founding phase which led to the raise of £2m in Jan 2019. We see them as a key part of the  
532 future of AgriTech in the UK and look forward to continuing to work together."

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/councils/innovate-uk/>

<sup>7</sup> Breedr, <https://www.breedr.co/>

533 **Table 3. Case synthesis matrix (Adapted from Dedehavir, Mäkinen, S. J., and Ortt, 2018)**  
 534

| <b>Characteristics of animateurship</b>   | <b>Animation activities</b>  | <b>Farm491</b> | <b>Case 1</b> | <b>Case 2</b> | <b>Case 3</b> | <b>Case 4</b> |
|---|--|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>Governance:</b><br>initiates, maintains, and develops ecosystem functionality                                | <b>Designing</b> the roles of ecosystem actors   | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Coordinating</b> internal and external interactions   | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Orchestrating</b> resource flows between partners   | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Assembling</b> components, materials and services to deliver functionality.   | √              |               |               | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Processing</b> information supplied by all actors in the ecosystem to enhance functionality                                 | √              |               | √             | √             | √             |
| <b>Forging partnerships:</b><br>Creates a network   | <b>Attracting and gathering</b> relevant partners together   | √              | √             |               | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Forming</b> links and alliances with organisations who have access to various resources                                     | √              | √             |               | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Creating</b> collaboration between parties through alliances  | √              |               |               | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Stimulating</b> complementary investments and providing opportunities for niche creation                                    | √              |               |               |               | √             |
|   | <b>Sharing</b> information to enhance network capacity.  | √              | √             |               | √             |               |
| <b>Platform management:</b><br>Provides technical basis for ecosystem to function                               | <b>Designing and building</b> a platform and place   | √              |               | √             | √             | √             |
|   | Initial platform, data, and infrastructure to build user-community and enhance value for network actors                        | √              |               |               |               |               |
|   | <b>Orchestrating</b> stakeholder innovations to align with platform  | √              | √             | √             |               | √             |
| <b>Value management:</b><br>Creating and capturing value  | <b>Bundling</b> offerings and supplied components of the service delivery (information, technology access)                     | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Stimulating</b> value appropriation for all actors  | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Developing</b> multi-actor engagement to define a problem or need, develop ideas, engage in activities to address the need. | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Animateur activities</b>  |                |               |               |               |               |
| <b>Expert (academic)</b><br>Supports and creates value by   | <b>Generating</b> knowledge from research and applied research   | √              |               | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Providing</b> consultation, expertise, and advice   | √              |               | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Encouraging</b> technology transfer and commercialisation   | √              |               | √             | √             | √             |
| <b>Expert (business)</b><br>Supports and creates value by   | <b>Providing</b> consultation, expertise, and advice   | √              |               | √             |               |               |
|   | <b>Encouraging</b> technology transfer and commercialisation   | √              | √             | √             |               |               |
| <b>Facilitator (multiple including institution)</b> Supports innovation ecosystem construction and operation by | <b>Building</b> connections and alliances between actors   | √              | √             | √             |               | √             |
|   | <b>Interacting</b> between partners and sub-groups   | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Providing</b> access to local and nonlocal markets  | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
| <b>Entrepreneur</b> Supports venture creation by  | <b>Co-locating</b> with others   | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Developing</b> a focused network of staff, suppliers, customers, and other actors   | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
|   | <b>Coordinating</b> collaboration between research and commercialisation partners  | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |
| <b>Sponsor</b> Supports value creation and the innovation ecosystem by  | <b>Providing</b> resources to entrepreneurs;   | √              |               | √             |               | √             |
|   | <b>Purchasing and co-developing</b> offerings of firms   | √              |               |               |               |               |
|   | <b>Linking</b> entrepreneurs to other ecosystem actors   | √              |               | √             |               | √             |
| <b>Regulator</b> Supports entrepreneurial activity and opening avenues for ecosystem emergence by:              | <b>Providing</b> economic and political reform   | √              |               |               |               |               |
|   | <b>Minimising</b> regulatory restrictions  | √              |               |               |               |               |
|   | <b>Enabling</b> enterprise and innovation  | √              | √             | √             | √             | √             |

535

536 One of the most striking points to emerge from the analysis is the strong internal dynamics of the Farm491  
537 team and the associated governance structures and processes. Crucial in this context is the institutional  
538 financial support by the RAU and the institutional animateurship between Farm491 and the RAU and vice  
539 versa. Obviously, Sarah and the team are paid animateurs in the McElwee et al., (2018) typology and other  
540 part-time business advisors provide business support. The Farm491 team and the advisors are also able to  
541 draw down on the institutional subject knowledge of the RAU academic staff including the authors Inge Hill  
542 and Louise Manning. Indeed in 2019/2020 Louise provided strategic oversight to the team. Farm491 staff  
543 are line managed by the Director of Commercial Services. and Louise now plays a role as an institutional  
544 animateur for the Farm491 team.

545  
546 The analysis conducted and explained in this working paper demonstrates the animateurship processes within  
547 the innovation ecosystem at Farm491. The Farm491 team operate as 'animateurs' to animate or activate (as  
548 in 'breathe life into') the member businesses to progress from ideation to commercialisation. The research  
549 demonstrates that active member engagement, especially listening by Sarah and the team, and effective  
550 communication support the formulation of a bespoke business support plan. This is not a 'one size fits all'  
551 approach but an animateurial one because the animateurs encourage and support the client to do whatever is  
552 required to meet the client's needs. In other words, they inform, inspire and animate change. The pricing  
553 structure (subscription fee) for the support and services does not preclude active membership and makes the  
554 institutional animateurship accessible to new start businesses.

555  
556 The various skills displayed in the Farm491 team and the wider animateur network appear to contribute to  
557 the level of individual and collective, institutional animateurship demonstrated at the RAU/Farm491. In  
558 analysing the four case narratives the animation processes at Farm491 is positioned. Depending on the needs  
559 of the member company, different aspects of 'Animateurship' are enacted on a case-by-case basis. This  
560 means that the animateurs who support the businesses, academics, facilitators, sponsors etc. need to provide  
561 direct, open, versatile and supportive engagement with each client/company they incubate. These behaviours  
562 and traits are essential when working with a start-up to give them confidence in their business and to consider  
563 and articulate the value proposition associated with their product/service and to develop the innovation  
564 ecosystem in which the businesses can thrive.

565  
566 In summary, Farm491 is underpinned by the entrepreneurial nature of the RAU and this is embedded in  
567 Farm491's products, services and offerings. This embracing of the entrepreneurial spirit imbues the RAU  
568 with an entrepreneurial 'Can Do' culture. It is not merely a corporate, financial transaction with clients that  
569 is reflected in this working paper, rather the building of a reciprocal 'alumni' type relationship. When  
570 considering the process of institutional animateurship, the type of Agri-Tech- businesses is important as such  
571 businesses require a blend of high level of industry-based scientific knowledge and entrepreneurial expertise  
572 making the RAU an excellent fit.

## 573 **Discussion.**

574  
575 Using narratives and examples from Farm491, the AgriTech incubator, accelerator and innovation space  
576 based at the RAU, this scoping study expands the reach of the theoretical concept of animateurs, animation  
577 and animateurship to consider their role in agri-technology adoption within the land-based sector. Farm491  
578 operate a tailored, hybrid support system that is part incubator, part accelerator and part hub (physical and  
579 virtual) which makes for a very sophisticated, agile innovation ecosystem where hybridity and flexibility are  
580 key. Farm491 members can take advantage of the institutional animateurship model that combines the  
581 processes and roles explored in this paper. The institutional nature of the support is vital because it allows  
582 the Farm491 staff to 'animate' change at a higher level and in a more complex innovation ecosystem than the  
583 village animateurs that have been studied to date. Aspects of self-efficacy have been considered within this  
584 innovation ecosystem in terms of the entrepreneur. And, we propose here in terms of the animateurs. Each

585 success increases the skill sets and confidence of the Farm491 team and wider network of animateurs and as  
586 a result animateurs can build expertise and act more intuitively/entrepreneurially

587  
588 Kubinowski (2019) reflects on the animation of entrepreneurship focusing on mobilising and creating and  
589 supporting new entities of effective business activities. For Kubinowski, an animator is a social role where  
590 the animator is not a leader, director, manager, or instructor. An animator's success is the personal success  
591 of the people whose activities they tried to encourage.

## 592 **Conclusion.**

593  
594 The contributions of this study are manifold. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective it extends the concept of  
595 animateurship from the individual to the team and adds another nuanced level to the extant literature.  
596 Secondly, the case stories can act as inspirational tales for other aspiring agricultural/agri-tech entrepreneurs.  
597 Thirdly, the study offers case studies from the underrepresented rural economies and thus enriches our  
598 understanding of animateurial practices in the rural context. This research examines in detail business  
599 support processes and pathways, offering practical insights for business support professionals. Moreover,  
600 this working paper has demonstrated that the concept of animateurship is definitely of interest to scholars of  
601 rural entrepreneurship because not every entrepreneurial activity in the rural sector is initiated by lone  
602 entrepreneurs themselves. Indeed, institutions such as Agricultural Universities and Colleges have a role to  
603 play in animating and propagating entrepreneurial activity in their extended networks. The development of  
604 innovation ecosystems requires both processes of animation to be defined and the skills of animateurs and  
605 does not end in the classroom. Animation is continued and accelerated through alumni networks and business  
606 hubs such as Farm491 where institutional animators guide, mentor and animate others into action building  
607 upon their professional and intellectual knowledge and experience.

608  
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610



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