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Innovation Diplomacy: World comes to Greater Boston to learn innovation from MIT



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04/18/2014

By Fiona Murray and Phil Budden

At a recent [MIT gala dinner](#) sixteen international teams (and many of Boston's Consuls) assembled to learn about innovation: in an important sense, MIT became a diplomatic destination, and – as MIT Chancellor Grimson put it – truly the “world has come to Greater Boston” to learn about the practice of innovation at this world-class institution.

Greater Boston is already widely-regarded as a global business hub ([as betaboston.com recognizes](#)). It is also regarded as a major hub of innovation (which increasingly defines its attractions as a business hub) with MIT's global standing in

innovation (and that of other fine universities in the Commonwealth) underpinning this reputation. MIT, however, is also becoming a key actor in the emerging practice of *innovation diplomacy*, and another reason the world comes to Greater Boston.



As a term, *innovation diplomacy* – like the earlier *science diplomacy* – has multiple meanings. It is worth teasing them apart before focusing on the role that MIT is playing globally.

In one thread, *innovation diplomacy* is about innovation *in (or for)* diplomacy – namely the game-changing application of new technologies (such as FDR’s hotline to Churchill’s bunker during the Second World War) and techniques (such as public diplomacy through social media) to the long-established practice of formal diplomacy. This is an interesting area but usually the preserve of professional diplomats, their foreign services and diplomatic academies. Boston is home to two key centers in this area: Harvard’s [Kennedy School](#), and Tufts’ [Fletcher School](#).

In a broader and newer sense, however, *innovation diplomacy* is about *diplomacy for (or through) innovation* and the [cast of actors goes well beyond professional diplomats](#). The latter are still involved, and – in this sense – this new *innovation diplomacy* shares with the older *science diplomacy* the sense that it is a method of exercising [soft power, in the way that Harvard Kennedy School Professor Joe Nye established it](#).

Nations (or usually cities and regions) with high innovation capacity are attractive to others, and duly exert soft power. As they do so, professional diplomats remain involved: harnessing this diplomacy for innovation overseas can help attract more foreign direct investment, and talented individuals (especially entrepreneurs), to their home nations, either as a returning diaspora or as new immigrants. The United States has several cities which are exemplars of this, while globally both Singapore and [London exert such attraction](#).

The sense in which MIT (and therefore Greater Boston) can be a global player in this emerging innovation diplomacy involves those interested in learning more about innovation in general (especially how to accelerate entrepreneurship in their local economies) and the role innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs) can play. Today's innovation diplomats include policymakers but also entrepreneurs themselves, large corporations and politicians. They frequently come to Boston to visit MIT, or find ways to [engage MIT with their home nation or city](#).

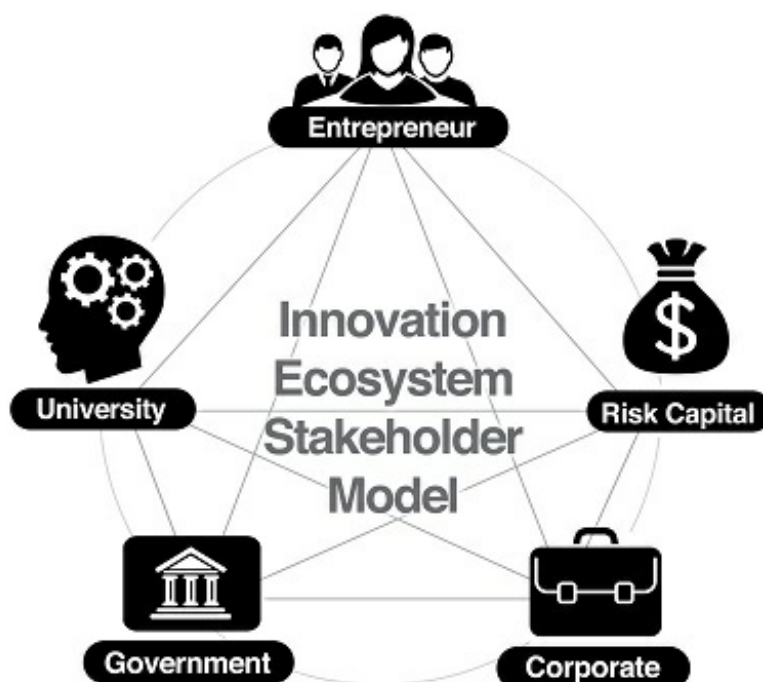
MIT's traditional response to such interest was to show one delegation after another along its [infinite corridor](#) and out into Kendall Square (and along the Red Line trains to the [Innovation District](#)), but the opportunities for meaningful diplomacy were limited. MIT has also long sent its students around the world, often sharing some of the entrepreneurial spirit with fellow students, corporations and universities. It has also hosted a wealth of international scholars and students.

However the most recent MIT response to this increased interest (and [flow of international visitors](#)) has been to provide a more formal and accessible channel to its innovation and entrepreneurship expertise through the new [Regional](#)

[Entrepreneurship-Acceleration Program \(REAP\)](#). Another has been a supporting class (with a lab feel to it) taught at MIT, namely the [Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Lab \(REAL\)](#). REAP is a setting in which regions can learn from MIT not only how Boston/Kendall Square works as an entrepreneurial ecosystem, but how to develop the tools to assess and analyze their own ecosystems, to design the right programs and policies to enable their acceleration.

Now in its third year, MIT REAP was the reason for those sixteen international teams (and range of Boston consuls) being on the MIT campus recently. One cohort of teams was coming to the end of its two-year engagement with MIT REAP, which had included intensive learning on MIT's campus (and tours of the Greater Boston innovation ecosystem) and two workshops overseas (in Scotland and New Zealand) to provide in-country comparisons. The second cohort of teams – ranging from London, through Moscow, Rio and Qatar, to Singapore – was just starting its two-year cycle, while other regions of the world are already lining up to be in MIT REAP cohort three, to launch in 2015.

In this broader sense of *diplomacy through innovation*, each of the [stakeholders in MIT's model of the innovation ecosystem](#) can play a role.



On the government side, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is fortunate to have a Governor who practices innovation diplomacy – talking about the strengths of his

a governor who practices innovation diplomacy, talking about the strengths of his state's innovation economy when he travels. But increasingly universities such as MIT are also serving as a key setting for innovation diplomacy: clearly MIT is a major university stakeholder in Greater Boston's innovation ecosystem, but others play important roles, and the region as a whole benefits from this concentration of highly-educated talent.

Another part of MIT's world-leading role is its contribution to the new *science of innovation*, that is the systematic study and data-driven analysis of innovation and entrepreneurship and the role that vibrant regional ecosystem, policies and programs play in their success. As entrepreneurship is the new rock 'n roll, and most parts of the global economy want their share, advocates want to know what actually works, not simply stories of success. Drawing on the social sciences, this research into successful innovation will allow a greater understanding of how entrepreneurship can be accelerated today and in a variety of settings.

Regions and governments will of course try to put the best spin on their local system, through forms of more or less successful public diplomacy, to help make it an attractive place to invest in or move to. The data from the new science of innovation will complement such public diplomacy efforts and allow meaningful comparisons in real-time using a wide range of standardized *regional entrepreneurship-acceleration metrics* (REAMs), providing another reason the world comes to MIT.

Some used to say that those who can, do; and those who can't, teach. It's increasingly clear that – at least in innovation – those who really can, do, but when they have a culture of openness and social mission they also teach – and analyze. MIT falls into the latter category in terms of being both a world-class hub of innovation and a key practitioner of innovation diplomacy, but it is also a global hub for the science of innovation and open teaching of the lessons learned. As such, MIT is unique in its role, and Greater Boston continues to benefit from its presence at the heart of its innovation ecosystem – which is yet another attraction that brings the world to town.

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