



Devika Thapar and Ale Maiano


We want to find the next Mark Zuckerberg ... in a week

The London venture firm Wilbe gives start-ups six months of educational content in seven days of ‘TikTok-style’ learning — and then invests in the future

NEW

Jess Jones, Senior reporter

Monday January 19 2026, 6.02am, The Times

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A London venture firm is upending the traditional “accelerator” model in an attempt to identify future multimillion-pound companies in just seven days.

Founded in 2020 by Ale Maiano and Devika Thapar, Wilbe uses “TikTok-style” video tutorials to teach enterprising scientists how to launch a business.

Wilbe's "Build Weeks" programme compresses months of mentoring and pitch preparation into a single week. Participants, usually PhD students or postdoctoral researchers, leave with a business plan, financial model and, hopefully, an investment. When the week is up, Wilbe decides whether to invest via its \$16.1 million fund.

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While traditional startup accelerators, such as Y Combinator or Entrepreneur First, typically take months of commitment and a slice of equity, Wilbe takes nothing upfront. "We've always maintained that know-how for venture and business should always be free," said Thapar, 39.

Each cohort generates about 30 startup ideas a week. To date, Wilbe has backed 22 companies across the UK, US, Germany, Switzerland and India, and says it has created more than \$1.3 billion in value in three years.

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The company has already completed Build Weeks at EPFL in Lausanne and ETH Zurich and, this week, it arrived at Oxford University. Science researchers there are embarking on a seven-day sprint supported by evening "office hours", where they can receive one-to-one feedback from Wilbe's investment team.



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“Within a week you’re not going to have the perfect version of the company. But it sets you off doing it, which is probably the biggest hurdle from a mindset perspective,” Maiano, 41, explained.

Among its successes is Cyclana Bio, a Cambridge-based women’s health company founded by two former researchers from Jeff Bezos’s Altos Labs. It secured an £8 million investment after Wilbe committed capital within 24 hours and introduced additional investors.

Wilbe originally ran in-person courses for researchers from elite institutions such as Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College London. It trained about 70 scientists a year on how to bridge the gap between academia and the business world.

“The good thing is that we recorded all of our classes over those years and we were in a position to, in effect, take extracts from those recordings, almost like TikToks,” said Maiano. It has allowed the company to offer budding entrepreneurs a platform with all the resources they need. Many are able to absorb up to six months of educational content within a matter of days.

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Signing up is intentionally “low-friction”, Thapar said, and applicants need only a LinkedIn profile and a short summary of their research.

Wilbe says it has “deep relationships” with universities, despite many of the institutions having their own spinout factories, known as tech transfer offices (TTOs).

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These offices handle commercialisation in exchange for equity which, according to some founders, can be as high as 50 per cent. Critics argue TTOs can be greedy, taking significant stakes while providing little support beyond a practical environment.

- [For and against: should universities demand equity in spinouts?](#)

“A lot of tech transfer offices are gatekeepers,” said Thapar. “They don’t necessarily welcome things like [Wilbe’s Build Weeks] because they want to be doing all of this in-house, which theoretically they can’t.”

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However, others argue that universities are right to demand equity in spinouts, given the amount of time, effort and expertise that goes into helping an academic take the first steps in building their venture.

Labour must be careful [not to “squeeze universities too hard”](#), Jeremy Hunt, the former chancellor, warned recently, adding that university spin-outs are vital to the UK’s competitiveness.

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Alessandro Maiano



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