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Foot on the accelerator

Emerge Education is the latest ed tech incubator to hatch in the UK. But is being 'accelerated' really worth it, asks Sunniva Davies-Rommetveit

As technology plays an ever-greater role in education, ground-breaking ideas have assumed a holy grail-like status. But getting a concept from start-up stage to market is fraught with difficulty. Many try, but few succeed.

The rise of ed tech "incubators", or accelerators, as they're sometimes called, has come as no surprise then. These firms support ed tech start-ups through their vulnerable, early stages, in the hope that they'll learn to wash their faces and attract investment.

To do this, they employ experienced industry professionals as mentors, and provide a small stipend in return for equity. They also connect their cohorts with early stage investors.





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Initially a US phenomenon, ed tech incubators are now starting to flourish in the UK. But sceptics question how much impact they'll really have - and whether there's enough investor appetite for start-ups in the country anyway.

Emerge Education, the latest outfit to enter the space, exemplifies the pros and the cons. The firm, which matriculated six start-ups in March (see list), boasts an impressive 91 mentors who offer advice over a threemonth period. This group includes Bernhard Niesner the chief executive of Busuu, Ben Whately, chief operating office at Memrise and Jan Reichelt, co-founder of Mendeley, all of whom have scaled products to millions of learners.

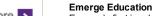
Vitally, too, the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School and Eton College have partnered with the incubator to test its start-up products. This suggests that Emerge is winning the respect of educators and not just preaching to the converted.

But while some of Emerge's cohort are sure to find investment, sceptics will question whether this is because, or in spite of their incubator experience. According to one critic, the mentorship many incubators provide is at best light touch, at worst minimal. Incubators can't really teach you the steely determination needed to succeed in business either, and as such may be more of a distraction in the long run.

Another criticism is that British ed tech incubators aren't specialised enough. Imagine K-12, one of the most successful incubators in the US, only supports start-ups focused on secondary schools. By contrast our platforms must offer something for everyone, and are potentially less targeted.

Perhaps the toughest challenge for incubators, though, is the UK's rather lacklustre venture capital scene. By their very nature start-ups are about experimentation, and most will fail. Yet, while in the US VCs are happy to back many horses in the hope one will win, here investors are highly risk averse. It's not surprising when Matern says that, while Emerge is always on the lookout for companies at very early stages, those that already have a product tend to generate a lot more "investor traction".

Still, there's a danger of being too cynical about incubators. Most programmes are still in their infancy and need time to bed in. Platforms in the US have shown that the model can work, too. Part of the battle in the UK, anyway, is creating more exposure for educational technology businesses, which are too often overshadowed by US peers. In that sense, firms like Emerge are doing a valid job in shining a light on talent. Let's hope they can convince investors to start spending, too.



Emerge's first incubator ran from January to March (with a demo day in April). Six start-ups took part, each receiving £15,000 in funding in exchange for 6-10% equity. They included:

Edhub: One place to login, manage and run all educational apps for primary and secondary school teachers. Removes the administrative headache of having to remember and facilitate hundreds of daily app logins by each teacher and student in a school

Ellumia: Mobile-first course-platform that enables delivery of any learning content in an adaptive, social and self-directed environment

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Lexicum: Personalised vocabulary trainer that remembers the context in which the user first encountered new words

Sixth Domain: Helps schools record and communicate good and bad behaviour to students, parents and other teachers, which measurably improves student behaviour

Learned By Me: Connects top language teachers from emerging markets with language learners for high-quality, affordable one-on-one tutoring over Skype

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South African schools group Curro Holdings has dropped a R6 billion (£300 million) takeover bid for smaller rival Advtech.

Learning Technologies Group acquires Eukleia for £7.5m

31/07/2015

Corporate training firm Learning Technologies Group (LTG) has acquired Eukleia, a provider of elearning to the financial services industry.

Civitas Learning acquires BlikBook

31/07/2015

US-based software provider Civitas Learning has acquired British learning platform BlikBook for an undisclosed sum.

Philippines: Ayala Education invests \$9.9m in University of Nueva Caceres

31/07/2015

The education branch of conglomerate Ayala Corp, Ayala Education, has invested \$9.9 million (£6.3 million) for a 60% stake in the University of Nueva Caceres (UNC) in the Philippines.

Exclusive: Sovereign Capital to buy recruitment agency Synarbor

31/07/2015

Private Equity firm Sovereign Capital has made an offer to buy teacher recruitment agency Synarbor PLC, EducationInvestor understands.

UK: Zondle to stay open after funding lifeline 30/07/2015

Games-based learning business Zondle is to stay open after an eleventh hour intervention by an "anonymous donor".

Exclusive: Bridges Ventures brings forward Babington sale

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Bridges Ventures has brought forward its sale of apprenticeships business Babington Group, EducationInvestor understands.

University of South Wales closes London branch 29/07/2015

The University of South Wales has closed its London campus after failing to enrol a single student.

Cognita schools roadshows £280m bond 29/07/2015

International schools operator Cognita has begun road-showing a £280 million bond to fund its expansion

US: Providence Equity Partners seeks up to \$3.4bn for Blackboard sale

29/07/2015

Learning management system (LMS) provider Blackboard has been put on the market by its owner Providence Equity Partners, Reuters has reported.

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Stars, stripes and start-ups

M&A activity in the US education industry is hotter than ever. Kirsten Noben looks at what's driving the trend and the subsectors getting most love

The name's bond...

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