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El article

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.

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 three-month period. This group includes Bernhard Niesner the chief executive of Busuu, Ben Whately, chief operating officer at Memrise and Jan Reichelt, co-founder of Mendeley, all of whom have scaled products to millions of learners.

Vitality, 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 Education

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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 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

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 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.

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