

Olus Education is working to close the digital skills gap

New learning innovator [Olus Education](#) aims to equip students, parents and teachers with the essential digital skills in the classroom and at home.

With [Openet founder Joe Hogan](#) among its investors, Olus Education is aiming to capitalise on a rapid evolution in online learning.

The company is the result of a merger between two existing market leaders in digital learning – The Academy of Code and Cocoon Education. The new entity will benefit from the teams' combined experience.

“Olus Education is working to close the digital skills gap,” explained CEO and co-founder Diarmuid Ó Muirgheasa.

“We work with schools to deliver core digital skills training to kids and teens in-school, and then offer more advanced courses that students can study with us directly from home.

“This is something that schools are struggling with almost everywhere, all around the world. Equally parents want to give their kids every advantage they can in life, and a lot of people see “tech skills” at or near the top of that list.

“The market for the kind of training we support is vast. For now, we’re focused on building our customer base in Ireland and the UK before expanding further afield.

Core digital skills

Ó Muirgheasa explained that the business offers a comprehensive suite of options to schools, but the core of it is the learning platform which includes all of the curriculum content that students and teachers need to build core digital skills.

“Teachers can use those resources to teach the lessons themselves, and it’s a great resource for those teachers to have, but we’re also conscious of catering to teachers who might not have the technical skills or confidence to dive into this stuff.

“That’s where the student learning portal comes in. This allows teachers step back and let the students lead their own learning. It includes video and written resources to guide them through that, as well as extra challenging content for any students with the interest and ability to progress ahead of their group. All the teacher needs to do is assign a module to the class and watch them learn.

“Around that platform we then add strategic and training supports for schools, to help them develop and implement their whole school digital learning plan, and the platform itself has management tools to help ensure all activity across the school is effectively coordinated.

“A vital feature of Olus Education is our system that supports at-home learning, for which students/parents register directly with us, and in particular our Pathway to Computer Science program.

“This is a long-term programme and we see it as something comparable to the grading system for students learning musical instruments. Our goal is to bring in students who are interested in coding or technology and support them on their journey for up to ten years. In the latter stages of that curriculum the students are reaching coding skill levels comparable to a university graduate, which is hugely satisfying for us and opens up extraordinary opportunities for the students at a young age.”

Nexus point

Olus Education CEO Diarmuid Ó Muirgheasa and chief product officer, Gavin Molloy. Photo: Shane O’Neill, Coalesce

Olus Education was founded from the merger of two businesses, Cocoon Education and the Academy of Code and is headed by Ó Muirgheasa and Gavin Molloy.

Gavin Molloy started out as a teacher, then became an educational consultant. In working with schools all over South London he found himself consistently running into the same problems: schools were spending money on training that didn't work, and the students weren't seeing any benefit from all that investment.

"That was the seed that later grew into the idea of a blended learning platform, and ultimately led to him founding Cocoon Education to fill what he saw as an obvious gap in the ecosystem," said Ó Muirgheasa.

"My background is in IT. I started out as a software developer for Version 1, the Irish IT consultancy, working on a variety of public sector projects. Like Gavin I saw what seemed like a really obvious gap in the education space, in my case focused on extra-curricular coding classes, and I founded the Academy of Code to fill that space.

"I also grew up around a lot of business owners. My Dad founded a software consulting business in the early 80s, I have several uncles who run or ran businesses in printing and book binding, and my grandfather ran a children's clothing and toy manufacturing business, Grace and Co, before moving into the printing business later in life.

"Maybe I would have stumbled into being an entrepreneur at some point anyway, but it was definitely imprinted on me early on that starting a business was a normal thing that someone could choose to do. I'm very lucky to have had that family background, and to have been aware of this as a career option at a very early age."

Right time, right direction

Ó Muirgheasa said that the Irish start-up ecosystem is gaining strength. "We're very lucky to be building this business in Dublin in 2021. The ecosystem is broadly in a good place, and there's a sense that we're moving the right direction as a start-up community. In saying that, there are a number of relatively small changes which would make a big difference to growing companies.

"Others can speak to this more eloquently than I can – Scale Ireland are doing a lot of good work in terms of advocacy – but in particular I'd be looking at how employee equity allocation works and making it easier to grant shares to employees, and reform of the EII scheme to make it more accessible to small businesses.

"I'd also be remiss not to mention property costs. We have a lot of younger staff, and it's hard to overstate how much of a burden the current state of the housing market is on them. That obviously puts pressure on wages, but even for high earners there just isn't enough supply at almost any level. In an already tight employment market that is a really dark cloud."

In terms of fundraising, Olus Education is currently working its way through the Dublin BIC Investor-

Ready Programme at the moment.

“We’ve already had informal conversations with a number of investors, and we will be moving that process forward later in the year.

“At the same time we’re in the really nice position that we can run and grow the business from cash flow, but we have also identified areas where we think can deploy money really effectively to grow more quickly. We’re lucky to have that flexibility of only raising if we find partners we’re really excited to work with, and if the details make sense for us.”

Life of an entrepreneur

Ó Muirghéasa said being an entrepreneur is basically an endless procession of problems to be fixed. “If something isn’t a problem to be fixed it probably isn’t on my plate in the first place – there are others in the business to look after the routine stuff.

“Starting out in the Academy of Code I definitely hadn’t internalised that idea, and I used to get visibly and vocally frustrated by all sorts of unforeseen speedbumps. In hindsight that frustration was frequently really damaging to working relationships, and it wasn’t great for my own mental health either!

“I’ve learned to be a lot calmer, and to accept this kind of problem solving as a core part of running a fast-growing business. That’s not to say I don’t ever get frustrated, but I’ve learned the difference between a productive response and a destructive response!

“One of my proudest achievements to-date is how we’ve now managed to make that a core part of the company’s culture. If something goes wrong, the initial response is never to ask, ‘whose fault was it?’ Instead, it’s ‘how do we fix it’ and ‘what process needs to change to ensure this doesn’t happen again?’

His advice to fellow founders is to prioritise your health, both mental and physical.

“I’m not always great at following that advice, but it’s so incredibly important. Things like meditation, journaling and regular exercise have made a big difference for me. Turning off unnecessary notifications on my phone has also been transformative (being really honest with myself about what “necessary” actually means is an important part of that too!)

“I started working with a business coach about a year ago, and more recently have joined a business advisory board. Both have been incredibly valuable, helping equally from a strategic and a mental health perspective. Being able to share a problem and talk through solutions in that kind of environment is really, really important, and spending time around others who are going through or have gone through similar challenges is also invaluable.

“I find myself coming away from advisory board meetings refreshed and excited about business, and I would say to anyone starting out running a business that a good coach is worth their weight in gold.”