



Ireland teaching out

By Conor Harrington

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Social entrepreneur and businessman Mike Feerick tells Conor Harrington that his current e-learning venture, ALISON, is not only about building a successful company, but about making a social impact in the global education sector.

When Harvard and University of Limerick graduate Mike Feerick sold his communications company, Yac.com in 2007 he had an idea.

Observing that the cost of providing online services was dropping and that the opportunities to monetise web-pages were increasing, he figured that someday it would pay to provide high-quality, free online content through making money from other revenue streams, such as advertising.

“That just said to me, ‘Wow, what an interesting business, but also, what a social impact you could have’, and that really interests me,” says the Galway native, who spent much of his youth in Tiernascragh but now lives in Loughrea.

Mike’s other company, Advance Learning, a provider of IT literacy courses, made the transition from paid to free content and he remembers that, at that time, some customers were so sceptical of free content that they preferred to pay for the same service.

Times have changed, of course, and online advertising is big business, while companies such as LinkedIn, HootSuite and DropBox, who offer free services with paid extras – the ‘Freemium’ business model - have demonstrated that there is money to be made in providing free content.

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Today, ALISON (Advance Learning Interactive Systems Online) boasts two million users worldwide across all continents. The premise is simple: the site, www.alison.com, provides users with online courses in basic, useful, subject areas, through a variety of media, such as video, text, audio, etc.

The courses initially focused on English language learning and IT, two of the biggest areas of online learning, in order to increase traffic. “We needed a lot of people on this platform to make it,” explains Mike.

Today, over 500 free courses have been published, and over 60 million free lessons have been delivered. It’s clearly a successful business model, but Mike insists that this is a secondary motivation for him.

“This is already a very valuable company and it will get more valuable, but I’m not interested in that, I’m interested in having a social impact,” he says, pointing out that for many people, highly specialised online degree courses are “useless”.

“What these people need to know is how to speak English, how to speak their own language better... and how to use IT.”

ALISON’s courses are not certified in the traditional sense. Some, but not all, of the publishers are academics, but Mike points out that not all experts need be academics and that the traditional means of delivery of education are no longer always the best option.

If you wanted to teach previously, he says, there was a very restricted environment to teach, in a formal sense.



“Now, through information technology, if you are an expert in butterfly metamorphosis...you can create a course. There’s no university going to tell you that you’re accredited, but everyone around the world knows that you’re the man to listen to.”

This competency-based method of accreditation is the way ahead, according to Mike, and traditional education institutions are going to have to adapt, he says.

“They’re not going to be able to continue talking about basic marketing and get a lecturer to stand in front of 300 people and read out of a book, which is what happened when I graduated,” he says.

With up to 200,000 new users anticipated in the next month, ALISON is experiencing huge growth and one of the biggest challenges facing the company is to add to its team, based in Galway Technology Park, Parkmore.

The company currently has up to 15 paid internships in web analytics, e-learning development or programming to offer to applicants at graduate or

postgraduate level, which will develop into full-time positions for the right candidates.

“We need bright people that are analytical; they can be from any discipline,” explains Mike.

“There could be lots of people out there that are doing interesting jobs, that are aggressive in the sense that they have an ambition to do well in their careers, but they’re looking for a change and they’re looking to do something that’s global, that’s really, really cool, has a social impact, and that’s local, and we’re a good call for that.”

Mike acknowledges that it can be difficult to find the right candidate in Galway, as opposed to, say, Silicon Valley, but he is determined to prove that Ireland, and the West, is capable of competing with California.

“Can the West of Ireland take on California? Are we bright enough? Can we honestly work hard enough? Can we be visionary enough? Can we be bold enough? Yes is the answer to all of that.”