

Meet Minerva, an online independent school offering a world-class private education

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Hugh Viney, founder and director of Minerva Tutors and CEO of Minerva's Virtual Academy about tutoring, delivering world-class private education online and educating the first children on Mars.

I had run Minerva Tutors – a tutoring and homeschooling agency – for 6 years and saw first-hand the growing demand, year on year, for home learning in the UK before Covid. Once Covid hit, millions more parents had homeschooling forced upon them. Whilst most families hated it, hundreds of thousands loved it as they saw their child happy at “school” for the first time in years. So by the start of 2022, our homeschooling phone line at Minerva Tutors was ringing off the hook. But choosing to homeschool with 1-2-1 tutors is expensive (more than private school), so we were having to turn down 95% of our inquiries. That’s when I knew I had to launch an *affordable* homeschooling service, which for me took the form of an incredible online school. I drew up the business plan in the summer and by November 2022 we had opened the school “gates” to 4 pupils. Two years later we’ve got 250 children attending Minerva’s Virtual Academy from 33 countries around the world.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Minerva's Virtual Academy (MVA) is a full-purpose online independent school offering a world-class private education at 25% of the price of traditional private schools. We have everything a great school has:

Assemblies on Monday morning with the headmaster

Incredible, inspirational teachers giving interactive and engaging lessons, not just recordings or videos

Pastoral care, well-being support and mentors to look up to

Life long friendships and a thriving school community

After school clubs and non curricula passions

Life skills, confidence, communication skills, entrepreneurship

World class learning resources and digital content

As well as world-respected qualifications like iGCSEs and A levels

– Flexible learning that adapts to the needs and situations of the pupil

It's just that all of this is delivered online so pupils come to school from their home, their study, their youth centre, their sports club – wherever they are, around the world.

School should not be one size fits all approach – that's what parents are faced with: one option. Whilst our school doesn't suit most kids, we are the perfect way to school for what I call the "significant minority" of 20% of all kids.

Children that:

have physical disabilities

have mental health issues

are neurodiverse

live in rural areas, far away from schools

have to work to support their families so miss out on school

have a passion they wish to pursue

are an elite athlete or performer

are in a family that travels the world

Traditional school does not work for these kids. In fact, traditional school lets these kids down, and makes them sad, frustrated, anxious, and angry. With up to a million kids in the UK currently refusing school, we are a solution to a much wider problem.

MVA reaches these families through smart digital marketing, partnerships with councils and schools, and strategic paid partnerships with like-minded organisations that support kids.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

In 2 years we have improved our product to keep ahead of the competition (there are 3 or 4 other online schooling offering the British curriculum):

– mostly by investing in full-time salaried teachers rather than the freelance tutors we borrowed from Minerva Tutors at the start. You get so much more all-round dedication and commitment once you employ teachers. Tutors can be sharks – some just want to do the hour they are getting paid for (at a very generous hourly rate) and bugger off.

we've invested in our digital learning content to make it best in class

we've added mentoring sessions from fortnightly to weekly so parents get a weekly report on their child's progress, wellbeing and involvement in school life

we've increased our in-person school trips from once a year to twice a term as they were so popular and that physical connection is so important to us.

at HQ we have improved our team structures across Sales, Marketing and Operations and adapted to being a "remote first" organisation

Growing from 0 to 50 staff (25 full time, 25 part time) presents its HR

challenges!

Tell us about the working culture at Minerva

We've been remote first since the pandemic and haven't looked back. We haven't been able to 'return' as in that time the 50 staff we have recruited are from all over the UK and in 6 other countries. So I haven't been able to say "come back to the London office twice a week". But we tried to create a culture that keeps us all connected.

This is taken from the Minerva Manifesto:

We are a remote-first company with the connectedness of an office-based team and the spirit of a family. We are just as proud of being HQ'd in London as we are of the geo-diversity of our team, which reflects the diversity and internationalism of our client base. Proudly London, with an international ambition. We work hard and play hard. We celebrate personal wins just as much as business wins. We make a living by transforming the lives of children and young people.

How are you funded?

We raised seed money in January 2021 to drive sustainable growth.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

HR is always going to be our toughest challenge with a remote-first company: issues that you could just resolve in the office or by the water cooler can often take a lot longer to clear up. We're not alone in this. Indeed, a lot of companies who've been forced to adopt home-working are seeing similar issues. However, we have always worked remotely and were aware of the challenges from day one. Naturally we need a number of systems in place to ensure we're looking after and listening to our team. These include:

- daily catch ups

- weekly meetings

buddy systems

socials

How does Minerva answer an unmet need?

We provide an online schooling solution for the millions of children that currently suffer at the hands of the traditional schooling system.

What's in store for the future?

10,000 pupils from 100 countries around the world. Children in the first colony on Mars will be pupils at MVA

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

The business you currently own and love might not be *the* one – it might be the next one (or even the one after that). But don't despair – it doesn't mean shutting down your current business. On the contrary, it's easier than you think to launch a new business whilst the other one is still going. Just make sure you've got great people to run them, and that they complement each other. For example, when kids at our school need tutors, they go to Minerva Tutors. When homeschooling families at Minerva Tutors want something that's more affordable we send them to MVA. Sister companies are a great thing to have.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

I have a one-year-old daughter – unfortunately, my routine is dictated by her. I do my best to go to the gym 4x a week, be healthy etc. But that goes out the window if she's woken me at 2am. I sometimes just crack on with work at 2am, but I wouldn't recommend that to anyone.

Hugh Viney is founder and director of Minerva Tutors and CEO of Minerva's Virtual Academy.

