

Challenges of Scaling Cultural Edupreneurship in an Institutionalized Educational Ecosystem: The Case of a Digital Platform Startup

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Abstract: This paper examines the challenges of scaling digital platform startups and contributes to emerging discussions on platform grafting in institutionalized ecosystems. Drawing on the case of Ekulturskolen, a Norwegian digital platform startup operating at the intersection of educational and cultural entrepreneurship, the study contributes to the literature on digital entrepreneurship and platform scaling. Specifically, it investigates scaling challenges within a strategically important Business-to-Government (B2G) context, drawing on insights from research on digital entrepreneurship, platform ecosystems, and digital startup growth. Ekulturskolen operates within the Norwegian municipal music and arts school system, offering digital educational content that complements existing public services. The findings suggest that successful platform scaling depends not only on technological capabilities and market demand but also on the platform's ability to engage with and become embedded within the existing ecosystem of public extracurricular arts education. The study further contributes to the understanding of "platform grafting" by illustrating how scaling a digital startup can be a prolonged and complex process, even in the presence of an identifiable unmet need and a technologically robust value proposition. Strongly institutionalized sectoral ecosystems may create substantial barriers to market entry and growth. These barriers are both institutional and ecosystemic in nature and include: (a) structural constraints, such as annual budget cycles and public procurement procedures, and (b) cultural-cognitive barriers among professional stakeholders who may perceive digital innovation as a threat to their professional roles. To overcome these challenges, digital ventures must invest in relationship-building with municipalities, develop partnerships with established actors within the ecosystem, and work toward financial models that are compatible with municipal budgeting practices and procurement requirements.

Keywords: Scaling, Digital Startup, Cultural Entrepreneurship, Educational Entrepreneurship, Digital Platform, Institutionalized Ecosystem.

1. Introduction

The advancement of digital innovations has paved the way for a multitude of platform-based startups. Digital technologies have restructured cultural value chains, opened new niches, and given rise to a new generation of independent entrepreneurs (Nambisan et al., 2019). Both cultural and educational entrepreneurship have benefited from utilizing digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI) to create unique offers and value propositions. These technologies have unlocked more complex cultural and educational markets, where novel forms of design, production, and distribution form the basis for new business models and create niches for new actors within value chains (Lăcătuș and Stăiculescu, 2016).

Cultural entrepreneurship, which involves establishing cultural enterprises and bringing cultural and creative products and services to the market, delivers cultural value while generating financial income (Dobrevă and Ivanov, 2020). Empowered by modern informational and communication technologies, AI and big data, cultural entrepreneurship dramatically changes how cultural and creative industries operate. Cultural audiences are taking on new roles – ranging from users to co-creators, advisors and collaborators in cultural production. By leveraging digital technologies to combine novel value propositions and innovative cultural products, cultural entrepreneurs challenge and transform established industry patterns. Beyond delivering aesthetic and cultural value, cultural entrepreneurship contributes to urban and regional development, drives economic growth in cities, and enhances overall quality of life (Ratten and Ferreira, 2017). Furthermore, because cultural entrepreneurship encompasses both social and economic dimensions, it is often closely linked to neighborhood revitalization, community engagement, and youth development in traditionally underserved communities (ibid.).

Similarly, in educational entrepreneurship (often termed "edupreneurship"), technological development offers new opportunities for autonomy, decentralization, and customization (Lăcătuș and Stăiculescu, 2016). Consequently, a new category of entrepreneurs has emerged – focusing on new educational formats such as virtual schools, online courses, and distance learning. Educational entrepreneurship manifests in various forms, including developing and editing educational products and learning materials, offering tutoring and teaching services, or establishing independent schools. The overarching goal of such initiatives is to improve learning outcomes, driven by a shared vision of a better education system.

Edupreneurial initiatives frequently target the needs of specific population groups by offering tailored educational solutions. However, several barriers can limit edupreneurial activity, including formal regulations in public education systems and informal constraints, such as attitudes towards newcomers. To overcome these obstacles, edupreneurs must often demonstrate that their innovations are effective, cost-efficient, and of high quality. Modern edupreneurs use complex combinations of pedagogy, technology, and business strategies to create value through unique educational offerings (Olatunde-Aiyedun et al., 2024). The combination of digital platforms and AI by edupreneurs contributes to improved learning and teaching methods, data-driven decision-making, and scalable business models (ibid.).

This paper explores the case of a digital platform startup combining cultural and educational entrepreneurship. The study places a particular focus on the critical elements for early-stage ventures: scaling and growth. Previous studies of digital platform startups have addressed the role of digital technologies for the new ventures and ecosystem development (Zahra et al., 2023, Nerbel and Kreutzer, 2023); entrepreneurial growth in digital business (Chen et al., 2023, Page and Holmström, 2023); resource orchestration and managing tensions during scaling (Zeng et al., 2023); the connection between startups and existing ecosystems (Björkdahl et al., 2024); value co-creation within the platform ecosystems (Hawlitischek and Hodapp, 2024); and managerial and organizational challenges of digital firm scaling (Brown et al., 2025). Notably, recent studies particularly highlight the specific difficulties of scaling caused by the need to integrate into pre-existing ecosystems (Björkdahl et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2025). The paper aims to contribute to this debate by addressing the following research question: *What challenges emerge when a cultural edupreneurship digital platform seeks to scale within an institutionalized educational ecosystem?*

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The next section establishes a theoretical framework, discussing digital entrepreneurship and platform ecosystems, the scaling of digital ventures, and challenges of integrating new digital startups into existing ecosystems. Further, the methodological approach is explained. The empirical section presents the case of *Ekulturskolen* – a Norwegian digital platform startup at the nexus of cultural and educational entrepreneurship and outlines the peculiarities of national and institutional context in which it operates. The paper concludes with a discussion and final remarks.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Digital Entrepreneurship and Platform Ecosystems

Advanced digital technologies, such as big data, AI, blockchain and others effectively enable the rise of digital startups and digital entrepreneurship. This phenomenon can be defined as the “practice of pursuing new venture opportunities presented by new media and internet technologies” (Davidson and Vaast, 2010). Similarly, a digital startup can be understood as a “venture that exploits digital technology in its operations or has a product or service of digital nature” (Page and Holmström, 2023). Numerous studies emphasize the significant role of digital platforms for entrepreneurship and digital startups (Nambisan et al., 2019) highlighting how these ventures operate within digital platform ecosystems (DPE) (Nerbel and Kreutzer, 2023) and broader entrepreneurial ecosystems (Zahra et al., 2023). A DPE encompasses interactions, transactions and joint value creation among various platform actors, including complementors on the supply and demand sides. The ecosystem framework conceptualizes platforms as complex techno-socio-organizational phenomenon, rather than simply technological artifacts. Depending on their unique capabilities, digital startups may assume distinct yet complementary roles within digital entrepreneurial ecosystems (Zahra et al., 2023). Digital disruptors leverage new technologies to radically transform or create new entrepreneurial ecosystems. Imitative followers emulate existing models and advance within an established ecosystem. Meanwhile, technology pioneers develop innovative technologies to dominate well-defined markets. Through these diverse roles digital startups actively shape the evolution of the ecosystem in which they operate. From a practical perspective, entrepreneurs need to build the necessary capabilities and access vital resources to effectively position and strengthen their ventures within these entrepreneurial ecosystems.

2.2 Digital Startup Scaling

Digital technologies are pivotal for both designing business models and rapidly scaling digital startups. The notion of scaling represents a “generative process through which a venture’s user base increases significantly between two points in time” with the objective of achieving competitive scale and establishing market leadership (Huang et al., 2022). It is widely accepted that digital scaling occurs quickly and differs from its

traditional counterpart. Indeed, due to digital platforms, applications, low marginal and distribution costs, and strong network effects, the scaling of digital startups may occur at a dramatic pace (Jansen et al., 2023, Zeng et al., 2023).

Organizations that seek to scale successfully need to pay close attention to such dimensions, as technology, people, contextual setting and internal organizational processes and actions (Sahay and Walsham, 2006; Picken, 2017). According to Jansen et al. (2023), scaling encompasses organizational change and transformation during which a startup needs to handle specific managerial challenges by purposefully and intentionally implementing growth-enhancing activities and processes. The success of scaling, therefore, depends on how effectively the firm orchestrates and executes these processes.

Previous studies have identified five common traits inherent to the successful scaling of startups (Nielsen and Lund, 2018): adding new distribution channels; eliminating traditional capacity limitations; delegating capital investments to partners; leveraging partners across multiple areas of the business model and developing platform-based business models that enable competitors to become customers.

Scholars also emphasize that raising external financing can be critical for scaling because digital startups may require several years to develop their business and attract users before generating significant revenue from customers (Brown et al., 2025). Furthermore, recent studies highlight that a startup's scaling success depends on the relational connection with the wider ecosystem and the interplay between external and internal resources (Zeng et al., 2023). Therefore, scaling should not be regarded as an isolated activity but rather as a comprehensive process that enables organizational growth, replication, and synchronization (Jansen et al., 2023).

2.3 The Challenges of Platform Grafting Into an Existing Ecosystem

As previously noted, platform-based startups can act as enablers of new ecosystems, or disruptors of existing ones. However, in some contexts, platforms are introduced into pre-existing ecosystems, where their success depends heavily on their ability to harmonize with the rest of the ecosystem (Björkdahl et al., 2024). The concept of "platform grafting" refers to the process of incorporating a new platform into an established ecosystem, resulting in a coevolutionary adaptation of both the platform and the surrounding ecosystem (ibid.). Platform grafting presents distinct managerial challenges that differ from the constraints experienced during the creation of a new platform. In their study of digital healthcare platforms in Sweden, Björkdahl et al. (2024) described the constraints and actions connected with introducing platforms into a sector characterized by strong regulations, a defined user base, and a critical network of physical assets. The authors argue that building strong dynamic capabilities is a key to platforms' successful entry into an existing ecosystem. Specifically, this process unfolds across three distinct phases. In the first phase, digital startups need to sense opportunities which involve identifying complementary assets, addressing the task requirements, acquiring key partnerships and investigating existing governance structures. In the second phase, startups must seize opportunities by integrating complementary assets into the new asset architectures and taking actions to legitimize the platform within the ecosystem. In the third phase, as the platform grows, business models and ecosystems should be reconfigured. This involved empowering asset structures with data and AI, managing coevolution with ecosystem actors, and revising governance mechanisms to unlock the full potential of digital platforms.

3. Method

The nature of the research questions posed in this paper presumes a qualitative methodology approach. The study adopts an explorative single-case study design to examine the scaling of a cultural edupreneurship digital platform within an institutionalized educational ecosystem. A case study approach is appropriate due to the contemporary and context-dependent nature of the phenomenon, which requires in-depth insight into organizational processes and institutional dynamics (Yin, 2018).

The primary data consists of a written semi-structured interview with one of the startup's co-founders. The interview was conducted via a structured questionnaire, followed by iterative written follow-up questions to clarify and elaborate on key responses. While the use of a single informant and written interview format limits depth and insight compared to oral interviews, it provides direct access to founder-level interpretations of organizational and scaling-related decisions during an early-stage development phase. Given the early-stage nature of the venture and its ongoing scaling process, the founder represents a key informant with privileged insight into strategic intent, organizational challenges, and institutional interactions (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). In

emerging startups, especially those operating in institutionalized environments, founder narratives are often a primary and necessary source of empirical insight.

To strengthen validity and enable triangulation, the interview data were complemented with secondary sources, including publicly available information from the *Ekulturskolen's* website and documentation related to the startup, as well as other available online materials describing the venture's activities and positioning.

4. Empirical Section

4.1 National and Institutional Context

In Norway, extracurricular arts education is organized as *kulturskole* system, which comprises municipal music and arts schools for children and youth. According to Norwegian government, these schools should facilitate children and young people's participation in various activities where they can learn, experience, create, and communicate cultural and artistic expressions in a safe and positive environment (Regjeringen, 2025). *Kulturskole* is intended to be part of a holistic upbringing within the local community, serving as a bridge between schooling and leisure time (Regjeringen, 2024-2025). Additionally, it is recognized as an important arena for achievement, inclusion, and the prevention of social exclusion.

The most common activities offered by *kulturskole* include music, dance, theatre, visual arts, and creative writing, although some municipalities also offer training in heritage preservation and traditional craft techniques. These music and arts schools are owned and operated by municipalities, which are legally required to provide cultural school services for children and youth (Karlsen et al., 2024). Municipalities finance these institutions through a combination of public funding and parental co-payments.

In 2017, approximately 100,000 students were enrolled in Norwegian music and arts schools (SSB, 2017). During the 2018/2019 school year, just over 13% of all Norwegian primary school children attended such schools (Berge, 2019). Nevertheless, capacity constraints prevent many children from securing a placement; historically, waiting lists have reached around 24,500 children (SSB, 2017). Waiting times vary from several weeks to several years depending on the specific municipality and subject. For instance, waiting periods of five to seven years have been reported for piano instruction (Odland, 2015).

Beyond teacher shortage in some subjects, these music and arts schools are not financially accessible to everyone (Berge, 2019). Children from low-income families are particularly disadvantaged, as they often can neither afford private alternative instruction nor access the relevant networks necessary to bypass these barriers.

4.2 The Case of Ekulturskolen

4.2.1 Background and Launch

The *Ekulturskolen* platform was founded in 2022 by two entrepreneur brothers. The startup emerged as a direct response to challenges within the municipal music and arts education sector, including budget cuts, protracted waiting lists, significant geographical distances, and the exclusion of children from financially constrained families (Ekulturskolen, 2026a). The foundational vision was straightforward: to make education in creative subjects accessible to all youth, regardless of personal interests, geographic location, or financial situation.

The business proposition of *Ekulturskolen* comprised digital courses in dance, music, drawing, and visual arts, spanning from beginner to advanced levels. The instructional content was co-developed together with professional educators and designed to serve as a curriculum supplement. Consequently, *Ekulturskolen* was not intended to replace existing municipal music and arts schools, but rather to complement them and scale access to demographics that the traditional public system could not reach independently (Ekulturskolen, 2026b).

Prior to launching the venture, the founders conducted extensive exploratory groundwork. They engaged with over 200 cultural administrators, teachers, and students across different municipalities, alongside reviewing national research reports. Specifically, the founders conducted 50 interviews with municipal cultural leaders and executed pilot projects within Norwegian schools. Furthermore, they maintained an ongoing dialogue with the Norwegian Council for Music and Arts Schools (Norsk kulturskoleråd) and the Ministry of Culture. This rigorous stakeholder mapping revealed a significant undeserved market and a gap in the existing educational offerings - as no adequate digital solution yet existed.

Initial resources and capital for establishing *Ekulturskolen* were constrained. The startup's primary assets consisted of intellectual and social capital in the form of knowledge, competence, and networks. One founder possessed a background in business development, digitalization, sales, and financing, while the other brought extensive media production experience and established networks within creative and educational environments. This combined expertise provided the venture with essential initial legitimacy and credibility in the field. Additionally, the founders recruited a specialist with AI expertise, which was strategically important for the venture.

The first version of the platform was launched as a basic video library. Since 2022, the founders have produced over 400 video lessons, accumulating more than 5,500 minutes of instructional content. Since its inception, the platform has undergone continuous technical and systemic improvements. It is currently utilizing modern infrastructure that ensures fast, flexible, and scalable architecture, facilitated by direct AI integration.

4.2.2 Business Model and Revenue Streams

Ekulturskolen utilizes a subscription-based revenue model, which offers certain predictability for both the founders and the customers. Entrepreneurs report that this model provides a reliable overview of monthly recurring revenue (MRR), thereby facilitating long-term financial planning and strategic business investments. On the demand side, families avoid per-video transaction fees, allowing children to freely explore the diverse courses on the platform.

Originally, the founders intended to rely solely on individual customer subscriptions. However, this approach alone could not resolve the matter of exclusion of the disadvantaged youth, nor could it effectively scale the business. Consequently, *Ekulturskolen* pivoted to focus on a diversified strategy comprising three major subscription-based revenue streams.

The first revenue stream is Business-to-Consumer (B2C), targeting individual families. Currently, this remains the primary source of revenue and serves as vital channel for generating continuous user interaction data.

The second revenue stream is Business-to-Government (B2G), where *Ekulturskolen* establishes commercial agreements with municipalities through their local music and arts schools. The founders identify this revenue stream as the most scalable in the long term and the most strategically important. To facilitate municipal adoption, a co-financing model was developed in collaboration with the SpareBank 1 Foundation, a Norwegian philanthropic organization supporting educational, cultural, and community-oriented initiatives. Under this model, municipalities receive free access to the platform's digital content during the first year, while the foundation covering 80% of the total subscription cost. In the second year, the municipal co-payment increases to 20%, and by the third year, the municipality assumes the full subscription price. This graduated pricing mechanism renders platform adoption both politically and financially viable for local governments.

The third revenue stream involves strategic partnerships with established actors within the educational technology (EdTech) market. These partners possess distribution networks and pre-existing customer relationships with the Norwegian public education and *kulturskole* sectors.

Like most digital platforms, *Ekulturskolen* operates within ecosystem that connects different user groups: children and students as end users of digital content, teachers and instructors as content providers, and municipalities and schools as the paying clients. Teachers play a particularly important role as supply-side complementors, their contributions elevate course quality, which in turn enhances platform attractiveness and draws new students. While this dynamic fosters significant potential for network effects – accelerating growth, user value, and systemic scalability - the founders observe that achieving critical mass and fully unlocking these network effects remains a prolonged process due to specific barriers which are addressed below.

4.2.3 Scaling and Growth

Every commercial platform harbor ambition for growth and expansion, and *Ekulturskolen* is no exception. According to the founders, the startup's growth strategy encompasses three primary dimensions. The first dimension concerns increasing the volume of active students utilizing the platform. The second dimension relates to expanding the number of municipalities adopting the solution (B2G stream). The third potential growth opportunity involves geographic expansion into the broader Nordic market.

Regarding B2G expansion, the founders report facing several significant barriers. The first barrier stems from the prolonged public procurement timelines, which involve complex tender processes and multiple hierarchical levels of municipal decision-making.

The second barrier refers to internal resistance within municipalities, particularly from teachers concerned about their professional roles. The founders of *Ekulturskolen* encountered considerable skepticism among the *kulturskole* educators, who feared that a digital platform could undermine their pedagogical role and authority, reduce demand for their experience, or threaten their employment security. To deal with this barrier, the founders revised their communication strategy. They explicitly emphasized that the platform is not designed to replace physical instructors, but rather to complement them in resource-constrained areas and supported students' independent practice between lessons.

The third challenge relates to municipal financial constraints, as music and arts schools are not funded at the same level as compulsory public education and are vulnerable to budget cuts. At the same time, the cultural sector is historically anchored in public subsidization and non-profit philosophies. Consequently, actors within this ecosystem exhibited skepticism toward commercial logic entering extracurricular arts education.

Finally, expanding to the wider Scandinavian market is identified as a vital long-term growth opportunity. The founders view dance, music, and visual arts as universal languages requiring minimal adaptation across borders. Furthermore, the structural configuration of the cultural school sector in Sweden and Denmark is believed to closely mirror that of Norway, characterized by municipal responsibility, public funding models, extensive waiting lists, and budget pressures. According to the founders, these similarities render the Norwegian experience and model transferable to other Nordic markets.

4.2.4 Key Insights From the Founder

In reflecting on the entrepreneurial journey, the startup founder highlighted that the most challenging aspect has been the misalignment between the adaptability of their digital solution and the operational pacing of the B2G market. The public sector is known to be slow in adopting new solutions and tools, which can be difficult for a startup that depends on revenues for survival and growth. Therefore, entrepreneurs may experience that moving into B2G markets takes a long time. This waiting time can be purposefully used to build relationships, design financing models that reduce economic risk for municipalities, and find partners with established trust in the market. Further, entrepreneurial experience suggested that partnerships with already established EdTech actors were an effective way to gain access to municipalities.

Understanding the target group and municipal dynamics was another key lesson. The founder experienced hidden structural frictions that were not immediately visible but emerged in inter-organizational collaboration. Teacher skepticism toward digital music and arts education turned out to be as significant a barrier as limited municipal finances. The founder's experience demonstrated that such challenges were best addressed through structural mechanisms (such as tender procurement processes) rather than personal communication, persuasion or direct sales efforts. Among the key lessons learned from the founders' experience is the importance of identifying barriers early and developing suitable solutions, thereby reducing both time and resource expenditures.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

By presenting a unique Norwegian case of cultural platform-based edupreneurship, this study contributes to the literature on digital entrepreneurship and platform scaling. The study examines the mixed-revenue model of a digital startup and suggested that a strategically important B2G revenue approach encountered significant barriers, which negatively affected scaling. The case illustrates that platform scaling does not merely depend on the technological characteristics of the platform, marketing and sales efforts, or the quality of the product/service offered. Rather, scaling of the digital startup is essentially conditioned by platform's ability to engage with and integrate into the existing educational *kulturskole* ecosystem – in line with the previous studies (Jensen et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2023).

Further, the *Ekulturskolen* case represents another example of platform grafting (Björkdahl et al., 2024). Even though the *kulturskole* sector is less regulated than, for instance, healthcare sector, it was challenging for the new actor to become embedded in a legitimate and strongly institutionalized ecosystem of municipal arts education. The case uncovers two types of scaling barriers in the B2G revenue approach. The first relates to structural institutional barriers, such as annual budget cycles, budget constraints, and public procurement

procedures. The second – perhaps less expected – concerns cultural-cognitive barriers among professional stakeholders (teachers) who perceive digital innovations as a threat. Therefore, these barriers can be conceptualized as ecosystemic and institutional rather than purely technological or market related.

The findings indicate that scaling a digital platform in highly institutionalized educational environment is strongly connected to process of ecosystem adaptation and legitimacy building. This brings us to important practical implications for digital entrepreneurs, who may benefit from adopting an ecosystemic perspective to scaling their digital ventures. In Ekulturskolen, rather than relying solely on direct sales, the founders invested considerable efforts in relationship-building, partnership development, and financing models that reduced adoption risks for municipalities. Such activities can be understood as mechanisms for building legitimacy and facilitating platform integration within the ecosystem.

In terms of novelty, while Björkdahl et al. (2024) developed the concept of platform grafting in the context of Swedish healthcare platforms, this study extends the concept to the field of Norwegian cultural edupreneurship. The findings suggest that similar integration challenges emerge in educational ecosystems, despite substantial differences in sectoral context. The case of Ekulturskolen reveals how scaling challenges are amplified when digital platforms operate under the hybrid entrepreneurial logics, including educational, cultural, and commercial objectives. Further, the study demonstrates that platform grafting involves not only technological and organizational adaptation but also legitimacy-building among professional groups whose identities and roles may be perceived as threatened by digital innovation. Finally, the study identifies practical mechanisms through which startups can facilitate platform grafting in institutionalized ecosystems.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, it is based on a single-case analysis of a Norwegian cultural edupreneurship platform, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, data collection relies primarily on a single key informant, supplemented by some secondary data. Finally, as the platform is still in an early stage of scaling, the long-term outcomes of ecosystem integration remain uncertain.

Future studies are encouraged to conduct more nuanced investigations of the platforms scaling and grafting through longitudinal, multi-case designs across ecosystems operating in different sectors and under varying value-creation logics.

Ethics Declaration

The study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical research principles. The participant (co-founder of the case startup) was informed about the purpose of the research and provided informed written consent. The participant also gave explicit written permission for the startup to be identified by name in the publication. Given the nature of the study, data was handled with care to ensure accuracy and responsible representation of the case.

AI Declaration

AI-based tool (ChatGPT) was used for brainstorming, language editing and proofreading in the preparation of this manuscript. All outputs from the brainstorming phase were critically evaluated, filtered, and verified by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the content and scientific integrity of the work.

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