Aligning Institutional Resource Commitment with Strategic Pedagogical Development to Create Online Distance Learning Provision in UK HEIs

Abstract

Purpose

This study explores the various models influencing online distance learning growth in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) due to the evolving politico-socio-economic environment and traditional educational challenges. It aims to understand their effects on teaching methods, resource allocation, and time investment. The research involves semi-structured interviews with 25 senior academic and management personnel involved in online education. The study uses theme analysis to understand current tactics and content generation processes, their benefits and drawbacks. The findings offer valuable insights for HEIs to align their resources with strategic pedagogical growth in online distance learning.

Design and methodology

Network and referral sampling techniques were employed to access individuals with direct experience in developing online provision within UK higher education institutions (HEIs). To understand institutional responses to political and socio-economic shifts, as well as declining international student enrolment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 senior academic and management staff from UK HEIs. The data were then manually analysed using thematic analysis, enabling an in-depth, nuanced interpretation through iterative reading and theme refinement. This study offers a comprehensive overview of the strategies adopted by UK HEIs, aiming to support strategic decision-making in online distance learning.

Findings

The results of this study demonstrate that UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) use a wide variety of methods to create online distance learning programmes. An examination of semi-structured interviews reveals the diverse procedures involved in content production for each model. The selected models have varying effects on the

advancement of teaching methods, allocation of institutional resources, and time dedication. The benefits of this approach include increased adaptability and ease of use, while the drawbacks are difficulties in obtaining resources and possible limits in teaching methods. This study provides a fundamental paradigm for integrating institutional resources with strategic pedagogical growth, delivering useful insights for HEIs who are considering or actively involved in online distant learning.

Originality/value

This study is unique because it explores and examines the many approaches used by HEIs to construct online distance learning programmes. The research addresses the contemporary political, social, and economic context and the problems faced by traditional educational paradigms. It makes a unique contribution by conducting interviews with senior academic and management personnel who are actively involved in online education. An examination of the lived experiences provides detailed insights into the processes of content production, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of each model. This study is the first complete analysis that establishes an original basis for aligning institutional resources with strategic pedagogical growth in the everchanging landscape of UK HEIs.

Keywords: distance learning, pedagogical development, content creation, online provision, resource commitment.

1. Introduction

The UK HEI sector was unprepared, *i.e.*, both under-skilled and ill-equipped, when the Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing measures were introduced. This resulted in rapid upskilling of academic staff and investment in IT infrastructure to support the temporary online delivery (Karlsson and Offord, 2023). Fast forwarding to 2023, most UK HEIs now has the competencies and capacity to develop online and distance learning provisions, which has resulted in a rapid increase in new online programmes. One of the factors driving the expansion into distance learning is the higher profitability and low cost of delivery, economies of scale and scope, compared to on-campus delivery (Morris *et al.*, 2020). This increase has brought about a new set of challenges for UK HEIs and one of the priorities is to motivate academics to engage with the development, maintenance, and delivery of online programmes. In this study, we use distance learning and online learning as synonyms to refer to the online degree programme offered by HEIs.

UK HEIs use a workload system that articulates the academic work into units for the time-based academic workload model (Kenny and Fluck, 2014). This generally does not provide equivalence or balance between the preparation time required for a weekly lecture and the time required to create online learning resources for a week's worth of learning (Kenny and Fluck, 2014). There are also other issues, such as digital literacy, that influence the academics willingness to engage with the delivery of online programmes, such as workload balance and the perceived value of time devoted to online development against research outputs. UK HEIs uses a variety of models and strategies for managing these issues, such as extra payment schemes for creating online contents for distance learning programmes, outsourcing the entire content delivery project and others (Altbach at al., 2019). Some universities use an OPM (online project management partnerships) model, where a third party takes on all LTA responsibilities, including the design and delivery of online learning contents (Springer, 2018). For instance, Kings College and University of Central Lancashire have partnered with CEG Digital, while others use alternative OPM providers such as Wiley, Coursera and Futurelearn (Cambridge Education Group, 2024, October 28; Mosley, 2022). In this model, the parent university only has direct control over admissions and graduations, which has raised the issue of comparability of the student experience

with other models. The issue of detrimental student experience within the OPM model has resulted in the decline of the degree segment of Coursera and withdrawal of degree programmes in the last 3 years (Shcherbinin *et al.*, 2019). However, the general recruitment to HEIs self-contained online degree programmes increased since the Covid-19 pandemic (Littenberg-Tobias and Reich, 2020; Schwartz, 2022). Most HEIs opted for the OPM model due to its potential to provide rapid growth (versus the problems of in-house scalability); conversely, that too comes with financial disadvantages due to the high percentage of revenue shared with third-party providers (Springer, 2018).

As an alternative to OPM, several HEIs have also tried partnering with technology vendors to achieve efficiency and speedy development of new learning resources, which are subsequently delivered by in-house academics (Piña, 2017). From a financial perspective, such partnerships are seen as viable compared with selfdevelopment or OPM. However, achieving an alignment of mindset between thirdparty developers, project managers and the academics can be challenging, along with building a shared understanding that incorporates the mission and vision of the HEI with their technology partners. Many HEIs find it difficult to achieve sustainable growth in online education due to a lack of such alignments (Jung et al., 2021). By contrast, if the HEIs follow in-house development and delivery strategy, then they struggle to compete with the LTA offerings by the tech companies. For instance, Holon IQ estimates an investment of over \$87bn in EdTech in the next 10 years (Education Intelligence Unit, 10th July 2020). UK HEIs are mostly looking for rapid growth and scalability, so they are also deterred by the long-term commitment and investments required for the in-house model, which usually results in slow but sustainable growth (Jung *et al.*, 2021).

The desire for rapid growth in the online and distance learning provisions within the UK HEIs is part of an effort to offset the financial challenges to student recruitment. These challenged created and exacerbated by Brexit for European students and by the ever-stricter Visa restriction for non-European students (Jung *et al.*, 2021). The current trends in overseas student numbers (Falcone, 2019) and the overall decline in TNE provisions based on flying faculty have also put further pressure on revenue generation through distance learning provision (Whieldon, 2019). This desire for

growth opens the strategic question of whether the intended growth in online provision should be achieved through partnerships with private companies or by internally investing in resources and skills (Morris *et al.*, 2020).

The focus of this study is to identify the variety of models and strategies used by UK HEIs and investigate their impact on quality of contents, staff engagement, resource commitment and profitability to draw conclusions on the cost-benefit and pedagogical pertinence of these models. This study is divided into the following sections: Section 2 discusses the underlying factors highlighted within the literature and formulates the research question; Section 3 states the methodological framework; Section 4 list and critically discusses the model and strategies currently used for development of online provisions; and the Section 5 reflects on the conclusions.

2. Academics, Online Provisions and HEIs' Strategic Development Plans

UK HEIs have generally struggled to match the usability and topography of synchronous and asynchronous experiences present in the learning environment of platform providers such as Coursera (Swinnerton *et al.*, 2020). This has resulted in an increase in complete outsourcing to OPM (online programme management companies) providers and technology vendors. However, there have been a growing number of concerns raised in the last few years over the quality of the student experience, HEIs reputational issues, and operational problems of shared governance with the provisions of OPM providers (Sundt, 2019). In such a model, students, educational authorities, such as QAA and all external bodies hold HEIs accountable for the overall service quality, irrespective of whether academic services are outsourced or not (Shaw *et al.*, 2020).

An additional implication of outsourcing is the challenge associated with managing partnerships with technology vendors, especially considering the different approaches and mindsets of academics and project managers (Wekullo, 2017). The project manager generally has a goal-oriented approach with a micro focus on development, while the academics have a macro viewpoint and a quality-oriented approach (Fink-Hafner and Dagen, 2022; Chen and Lin, 2018). Swinnerton *et al.* (2020) show that brand and (external) rankings play a significant role in determining the likelihood of partnerships with private organisations. When deciding to partner with OPMs,

economic imperatives are central to HEIs decision making, in terms of which subjects or degree programmes to offer. Further Morris *et al.* (2020) study show that Russell Group universities chose to work with OPMs, and non-Russell Group universities were using alternative mechanisms. These different approaches are driven by HEIs' reputation, their hierarchal status, their financial health and from their desire to achieve efficiency (Fumasoli *et al.*, 2019).

Beyond the OPM model, the UK HEIs that partner with technology firm are forced to unbundle their learning and teaching provision to accommodate for the mixed delivery set within any hybridised model. Unbundling is defined as "disaggregation of educational provision into its component parts, likely for delivery by multiple stakeholders, often using digital approaches" (Swinnerton *et al.*, 2020: 20). The practice of unbundling in the online education is challenging the learning, teaching and assessment ethos at the core of the HEIs' mission (Swartz *et al.*, 2018). HEIs may negotiate a contractual relationship with third party providers that are more in alignment with their institutional values and culture. However, they still need to accept the different styles of management and decision-making (*e.g.*, short-term project orientation versus longer-term reputational perspectives) which will come with the contractual relationship (McCowan, 2017). Currently, the recognition of the risk associated with it and any mitigating strategies seem to be absent in the publicly available policy documents of UK HEIs.

There is also a level of tension within the HEIs as senior stakeholders don't normally have the buy-in or support of academic colleagues when making decisions to partner with private companies to offer academic provision (McCowan, 2017; Morris *et al.*, 2020). Whitchurch (2008, 2023) observed a third space between insourcing and outsourcing, which employs blended roles spanning professional and academic domains. In the re-bundled online university model, most academic work is insourced; para-academic roles maintain the support and belonging bundle; and everything is operationalised by strategic managers within a centralised performance culture (Baltaru, 2022a; McCowan, 2017; Macfarlane, 2011). Such re-bundled online models allow for more unified standards and comparable student experiences across f2f and online provisions. In these models, generally an academic is a module leader for both face-to-face and distance learning modules, which encourages the more frequent

holistic updating of the online contents. This maintains an alignment between the two provisions (Baltaru, 2022b). The model based on insourcing of LTA activities that use in-house platforms allows the HEIs to retain all the revenue. However, the bottleneck in the implementation of this model is the upskilling of academic staff for the skills required to construct online contents and requirement for an in-house team of encultured learning technologists (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020). The labour market for academics skilled to construct online programmes is also competitive. All these factors slow the pace of growth; however, the in-sourcing model offers sustainable growth, this can only be achieved through the long-term upfront investment. There are three key areas where HEIs struggle while adopting this model. These themes are learning technology, academic staff and change management in the adoption of new models (Liu *et al.*, 2020; Mishra *et al.*, 2020; Habib and Johannesen, 2014). Managing the adoption includes various elements of institutional strategy, such as strategic intent and academic development along with a shared vision across university.

The adoption of strategies for growth through an in-house development model is also directly dependent on the adoption of the new learning technologies associated with online delivery. Generally, the minority of academics with a higher degree of internet self-efficacy are more likely to adopt online tools (Graham, 2018; Buchanan *et al.*, 2013), while the majority of academics resist the adoption of new technologies (Esteve-Mon *et al.* 2023; Birch and Burnett, 2009). Many studies have documented the complexity of barriers to the adoption of technology (Akpan *et al.*, 2022; Reid, 2014). Technological anxiety within the academic community has a strong negative impact on the faculty's intention to adopt new learning technologies required for online learning (Gunasinghe and Nanayakkara, 2021; Bruggeman *et al.*, 2021; Evans, *et al.*, 2020).

There is also some perception among academics that e-learning strategies are overly focused on technology rather than pedagogy and are developed without consultation with teaching staff (Nichols, 2020). This leads to interinstitutional tension (Rodrigue *et al.*, 2016; Buckenmeyer *et al.*, 2016; Gordon *et al.*, 2018), as academics perceive that they are asked to operate outside of the institution's core strategy, or contrary to a published LTA strategy (Forsyth *et al.*, 2010; Desplaces *et al.*, 2015; Nichols, 2020). Wach *et al.* (2011), Jobst (2016), Snart (2017), Taylor *et al.* (2018) find that institutional

strategies collaborating on both technology and pedagogy are key to improving adoption.

The HEIs strategies, by contrast, are driven by time, budget, and resource availability. The academics' time dedicated to developing online contents for distance learning has a direct relationship with the positive social presence and social interaction experienced by the distance learning students (Philipsen *et al.*, 2019). Considering academics' time is one of the key resources required to develop successful in-house online provision, several studies show that a lack of adequate time commitment is the cause of failure to adopt learning technologies (Drent and Meelissen, 2008; Simpson, 2010; Al-Mamary *et al.*, 2022; Deacon *et al.*, 2023;). For academics, the disproportionate time assigned in a workload allocation model for developing online reduces the willingness to be part of online provisions (Meyer and Xu, 2009; Pomerantz and Brooks, 2017; Johnson *et al.*, 2022). Studies show that some academics' respond to time constraints by opting for basic descriptive material within the online contents, so it would not require regular updating, which exponentially reduces the quality of materials and the experience of students (Esteve-Mon *et al.*, 2023; Birch and Burnett 2009).

Apart from academic time, university also has to invest in infrastructure, IT, learning technologists and administrative teams depending on the type of model they use for developing online provision (Chow *et al.*, 2017). For instance, complete out-sourcing based on OPM model removes the need for academics' time. However, such approaches make it difficult for the institution to enhance their online pedagogical model of delivering online learning. The lack of development of in-house facilities and skills due to out-sourcing could also have an impact on long-term capability, profitability, and growth. The need for the academic and non-academic direct resources and investments required for building an online provision is labelled as institutional resource commitment (IRC). This study further defines strategic pedagogic development (SPD) (Figure 1) as the ability of the institution to achieve continuous enhancements to their online contents and the ability to benefit from their online provision directly or indirectly. This may include benefits such as using the contents and technologies developed for online provision to improve student experience at on-campus teaching. The continuous enhancement within the online

learning is required to ensure that the technology and the learning experience provided within the provision is relevant to a global audience and equitable to the face-to-face learning experience (Archambault *et al.*, 2022). SPD reflects institution's ability to continuously evolve and enhance teaching practices that are scalable and sustainable over time. As shown in figure 1, the key element of SPD is an institution's ability to adopt new technologies for development of active, personal, inclusive and collaborative pedagogical methods for teaching online students.

The needs of online students are diverse and constantly evolving and SPC captures institutions resilience to respond to these changes through adaptation new pedagogical strategies. The adoption of new technologies and new pedagogical strategies is underpinned culture of learning and implementation of data driven and research informed teaching techniques (Grimus, 2020). The study explores how IRC acts as an influencing factor on SPD, while both are impacted by the institutional time frame constraints.



Figure 1: Conceptualising Strategic Pedagogic Development (SPD)

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All these issues discussed above are generally a consequence of HEIs opting for a model for developing online provision that does not align with the available institutional resources such as academic time dedicated to developing an online pedagogical approach. This lack of alignment is essentially underpinned by a lack of institution-wide understanding of the long-term impact of strategy implementation. Therefore, the research question that this study focuses on is:

What are the models HEIs use to balance strategic pedagogical development with optimal institutional resource commitment within their pre-defined time requirements for creating, maintaining, and delivering online distance learning provision?

3. Research Methodology

This exploratory study aims to answer the research question through a qualitative research inquiry based on the paradigm of thematic analysis constructed on descriptive phenomenology. The descriptive phenomenological approach was selected to construct an understanding of the topic from the lived experiences of participants who have worked in the online provisions of a number of UK HEIs within their careers (Sundler *et al.*, 2019).

During 2022-23, we conducted 25 unstructured interviews with participants that were spread across six HEIs from England and Scotland. We used network sampling and referral sampling technique to get access to dispersed individuals with lived experience of development of online provision within UK HEIs. The participants included 15 academic staff with experience of working on online and distance learning provisions within UK HEIs and 10 people from management teams within UK HEIs. The narrative obtained through the sample reached the saturation point and therefore the data collection was ceased at n=25. The interviews were not recorded to ensure the strict anonymity of the participants. All the interviews were conducted as informal but purposeful conversations, conducted within casual settings with openness and reflective attitude. This format, compared to pre-planned interviews, provided a much greater flexibility and sensitivity, where the interviewee can easily extend and elaborate the narrative across different tangents and develop themes. Sensitivity and discretion were also essential, as the research touches on the strategic initiatives taken by interviewees respective HEIs, along with desired and undesired outcomes.

We also did not record participants' current or previous associations with UK HEIs to allow participants to engage in a dialogue with themselves and with their lived experiences. This also allowed participants to use examples from their current and previous institutions. The pertinence of using a soft approach to data collection was to capture the lived experiences of the participants and their introspective account and reflective point of view of those lived experiences.

This approach is also deliberately chosen because of the executive, managerial and leadership outlook of participants within their everyday job role in the HEIs. This approach is further justified due to the analytical focus of this study, which is to document, explore, and understand the meanings, its complexity, and aftermath of when a UK HEI selects one of the models for the growth of online provisions. We also applied interpretive phenomenology (Gadamer, 2004) as we asked the participants to elaborate on the narrative of internal rationalisation and factors considered in decision-making prior to the selection of the respective model.

The research team provided a short summary on focus, scope and purpose of the study to the participants, as part of pre-interview activities and informed consent. The saturation point in the narrative was reached with the repetition of 7 models (see Table-1 for details) for developing online provisions and the retelling of their benefits and disadvantages; in addition to the reiteration of relationship of each of the framework with the institutional resource commitments, strategic pedagogical development and timescale.

The study used thematic analysis to analyse the data. Due to manageable size of our dataset, we were able to conduct the thematic analysis manually rather than through a software. The thematic analysis was also conducted manually to develop in depth insight and richer interpretation of the data through reading, re-reading to develop, organise, reorganise and refine the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017 and Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The manual thematic analysis reduced the barriers between the data and the research team. It also allowed deeper engagement with the data, as compared to mechanical and sometimes rigid coding through software (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This process was intuitive and allowed for the critical use of the evolved understanding of interviewer within the development of themes (Terry *et al.*, 2017).

4. Aligning the model to strategic pedagogic development and institutional resource commitment

This section presents the development and delivery models and discusses their relative advantages and disadvantages across the three dimensions we have outlined. *Strategic pedagogic development,* which is driving the institutional initiative in co-creating new academic provision to deliver to diverse groups of students on campus. *Institutional resource commitment,* which necessarily places constraints on the models that may be adopted as human and financial resources (amongst others), are finite within all organisations. The *temporal dimension* demands that the model deliver contemporary, up-to-date material within acceptable timeframes to deliver a positive student experience and an acceptable return on institutional investment.



Figure 2: Models and Strategies in Relation to IRC and SPD

Strategic Pedagogical Development

Authors own work

There are, in total, seven models that are currently used by universities for developing online/distance learning provisions within the UK HEI sector. While there is a clear preference for Russell Group Universities to opt for complete OPM partnerships, all other universities are likely to opt for one of the other six models. The Table 1 lists the descriptions of these 7 models identified by this study, while the Figure 2 shows the resource commitment required for each model and the impact of each model on positive strategic development. The soft approach used for data collection in the interviews, allowed for a clear understanding on each of the model, as mentioned in Table 1. 72% of our participants mentioned at least 5 of the models, while 40% of the participants were familiar with all of the models. There was no difference in narrative

on advantages or disadvantages of the model mentioned by the participants from management team or academic staff. The 10 participants from management team had both a thorough understanding and worked experience of using at least 3 models. All our participants agreed on the complexity of balancing IRC, SPD and time constraints in achieving a successful online provision.

4.1: In-house – monetary reward

This model is characterised by materials being created by faculty with intimate familiarity with the culture of the HEI, its quality systems, and the 'style and voice' used in on-campus, face-to-face modes of delivery. There is no 'contractual inconsistency' through outsourcing; there is uniformity in delivery as both the style (delivery voice) and substance (modular/course content) are written by one academic familiar with inhouse quality frameworks and standards. This is the primary advantage of the initial development of the materials, with synergies being experienced through some content being able to cross modes of delivery (MacFarlane, 2011). Pedagogically, this is strong, on the proviso that academics can be persuaded to engage with online curricular developments and any issues with the adoption of technologies are overcome (Schneckenberg, 2010; Reid, 2014).

However, the strategic pedagogic advantages can be somewhat negated by immediate and longer-term costs. Initially, a suitable payment to attract the in-house academic workload can be expensive. Secondly, payment for the development of the material concludes the transaction, and updates, innovations, and maintenance can become administratively problematic and financially unviable. Further, a problem may arise with a lack of faculty academic engagement and diminishing responsibility as the material online and on-campus diverges through time.

4.2: Hybrid – Standardised design

The hybrid nature of this design relies on three key constituents: a Project Manager; external associate/affiliate academics; and an academic content co-ordinator within each school. There are pedagogic caveats to utilising this model that must be considered before adoption. The model uses external academics, and with rigid templated provisions to ensure consistency, it is most appropriate for entry-level or

conversion material, not either technical or interpretive subjects. An extension of this templated design is that there is no flexibility for pedagogic innovation; consistency becomes uniformity, and technology, not pedagogy, drives delivery (Cigdem and Topcu, 2015), although rigid templating does ensure adherence to quality standards.

From a resource perspective, however, there are benefits, particularly when these multiple transactions are handled by professional project managers. If material is neither too complex nor too technical, affiliates may be easily sourced, and material may be developed within strictly controlled timeframes. However, emphasis on standardisation may stifle pedagogic innovation (Liu *et al.*, 2020) and the use of contracted affiliates or associates, make the task of keeping contents up to date expensive and operationally onerous as there is no ownership of material.

4.3: In-house (Macro-management)

In this model the academic's time is allocated through an incumbent workload allocation/management system, development and delivery become an intrinsic part of academic duties. In macro-management model, the existing teaching and scholarship structure of module/course/programme and the already-existing embedded pedagogical approach of the HEI is used, which allows for consistency in quality and alignment across provisions (MacFarlane, 2011). Technological adoption can, again, be problematic (Buchanan *et al.*, 2013), as may require upskilling of faculty and hiring of learning designers.

This model has two main challenges from resourcing and operational perspective. Firstly, operationally managing a new stream of development within existing academic workloads (Meyer and Xu, 2009) and secondly, the substantial upfront investment in the I.T infrastructure/technical teams may be required (Reid, 2014). These challenges may act as a delay on (probably ambitious) timeframes and targets.

Models for Developing Online/Distance Learning	Content Creation	Contents Quality Checkpoints	Advantages	Disadvantages
In-house – monetary reward	Academics are paid to create contents.	Built-in quality checks, managed centrally.	 Uniformity of content quality across provisions. Ability to re-use contents. 	 One off payment creates major issue of revising the contents in long term, as academics have diminishing responsibility. Expensive. Challenging to deliver on time and challenging to achieve academic engagement.
Hybrid – Standardised design	Contents are created by external associate academics hired on temp contracts and managed by Project Managers.	Each programme/course has an academic Programme Leader in the School who is responsible for signing off contents by the programme expects (academics) within that School	 Appropriate for conversion courses that require entry level subject contents. On time delivery of contents. Standardisation across DL provision. 	 Can become inappropriate model for technical contents. No pedagogical innovation and works with simple design models. Challenging quality control. One off payment creates major issue of revising the contents in long term, as associate academics have no responsibility after signing off. Requires extensive standardisation and pre-templated design. Difficult to find established subject experts in some areas.
In-house (Macro- management)	The creation of contents is formulated into workload management system of academic duties.	Each programme/course has an academic Programme Leader in the School that manages the programme academic team.	 Improved quality of contents and built-in quality control checkpoints. Ability to re-use contents 	 May require team of learning designers (bridge between academic and Learning technologist). Requires investment in academic team. Challenging academic workload management.
In-house (Micromanagement)	The creation of contents is formulated into workload management system of academic duties. Module contents are divided into learning packages (LP). Each learning package is assigned a standardised design. Academics are provided skeleton design to add contents and micro- managed centrally by providing deadlines for each LP.	Built-in quality checks managed centrally.	 On time delivery of contents. Ability to re-use contents Improved quality of contents and built-in quality control checkpoints. 	 Requires extensive micromanagement. May requires team of learning designers (bridge between academic and Learning technologist). May require investment in academic team. Requires extensive standardisation to achieve timely delivery.

Table 1: Models Used by HEIs to Develop Online Contents

In-house (Teaching & Scholarship Promotion Pathway)	Academics take control of design and construction of contents, to demonstrate pedagogical innovations in L&T practices.	Built-in quality checks managed centrally or at School level.	 Encourages pedagogical innovation. Ability to re-use contents Sharing of contents across multiple provisions. Easy to manage the development processes. 	 Requires HE institution to have a separate promotion pathway and criteria for academics mainly focus on L&T (includes teaching only contracts). Requires investment in academic team. Requires time management of the project. Difficult to achieve consistency
Outsourcing	Partnering with the external institution to design and create contents.	 Lack of natural quality checkpoints. Over reliance on post- delivery Stats, such as student satisfactions survey. 	 No increase in academic workload Low level management required at School or University level. 	 Can become expensive. Hidden costs. Needs a robust quality assurance framework. Post-delivery management.
Semi-outsourcing	Combination of using external firms and pool of associated academics (externals). Creating a separate School for online learning, which maintains the database of actively available external academics that are paid on project-by-project basis.	Built-in quality checks managed centrally.	 No increase in academic workload Ability to re-use contents 	 Difficult to find established subject experts in some areas. Requires extensive standardisation and pre-templated design. Requires extensive quality checks.

Authors own work

4.4: In-house (Micro-management)

There are similarities with macro-management in terms of the use of incumbent workload management frameworks to allocate the work and issues with technical skills, bases but it is more extensively micro-managed. An important caveat with this model is that allocation is often managed by capacity rather than competence or capability, and both strategic pedagogic development and institutional resource commitment can be negatively impacted – capacity does not equate to capability. The positive rigidities of the hybrid model are reflected here, with each module/course being divided into learning packages that are allocated for completion by faculty to the requisite, quality pre-approved, standardised design (MacFarlane, 2011). Pedagogically, however, the weakness also transfers, *i.e.*, with increased rigidities, there is a stifling of innovation and technology can become the primary driver in material development (Cigdem and Topcu, 2015).

As with macro-management, there are requirements for investment in faculty and/or technical staff if these resources do not already exist or are inadequate for the growth of the area. Timeframes and deadlines are managed through the existing line management process within the department, which should encourage timely completion and submission of the learning packages, dependent on engaged faculty involvement. From a resource perspective, this can be a positive; however, one weakness that might arise is that academics in line management roles are not necessarily project managers and there is the potential for slippage when micro-management of the project is sacrificed as academic priorities and ambitions are prioritised by the manager.

4.5: In-house (Teaching and Scholarship Promotion Pathway)

This in-house model works on a different motivation from the engaged faculty, with a more long-term perspective being taken rather than purely financial and transactional and assuming an embedded ethos of pedagogic innovation. The academics involved will have a theoretical and applied interest in designing discipline-specific resources for delivery within an online environment, negating the issue raised above – neither rigid templates nor technology will be the primary drivers in material development (Cigdem and Topcu, 2015). The development has a strong pedagogic basis and

allows for materials to be shared across modes of delivery with an assumed quality assured through engagement and familiarity with in-house learning and teaching standards. Further, these academics are far less likely to be impacted by technological anxieties, and this will drive the updating of materials (Johnson *et al.*, 2012), removing the well-documented ambidexterity deficit in academics proficient in material content design but not technical proficiencies.

From an institutional perspective there is a requirement for a separate promotion pathway for the Learning, Teaching and Scholarship pathway to be in existence (the vocabulary varies, but a model allowing career advancement opportunities through 'pedagogic' innovation similar to research pathways).

4.6: Outsourcing

This model works through partnerships formed between the HEI and OPMs who will ideally share certain institutional characteristics such as values and culture (Morris *et al.*, 2020). However, the matching of these characteristics can entail a great deal of time and resource commitment, while real, rather than surface, alignment in intangibles such as values and culture can prove elusive. Where resource issues have previously been the dominant logic in partnering with OPMs (Sundt, 2019) but in this model critical mass is achieved in cohorts by OPMs through institutional name, there are now more reputational and pedagogic issues to considered. Especially considering the fact the HEI faculty never see the contents or have any control on the frequency of updating contents.

The low resource commitment from a managerial perspective and little monitoring, with only evaluation mechanisms based on OPM generated student satisfaction surveys, raise key pedagogic and reputational questions. Where there have been few quality checks, a lack of post-contractual academic oversight and with the project managers driven by economies of scale and scope, results in a student experience that negatively compares with the in-house delivery. In long term this model also limits the expansion due to reliance on third party for skills and pedagogical approaches.

4.7: Semi-outsourcing

A model that, as envisaged, engages the optimal combination of internal and external resources. The model necessitates a third space professional (Whitchurch, 2008, 2023) being engaged or developed who will possess the necessary ambidexterity to deal with, for instance, the in-house LTA domain and the external technological specifications, etc. Key characteristics of the model from a pedagogic perspective may include in-house quality checks. Some HEIs use faculty while other engage 'free-lancers' academics.

Pedagogic risks here are dependent on the division between tasks conducted by faculty and outsourced companies or individuals. Extensive templating and rigidity in standardisation do, as above, stifle creativity for academics, although they may drive costs downward. Resource commitment can be positively impacted, but where there is the potential for pedagogic and reputational risk, a temporal dimension is again present – how long can the benefits be enjoyed before a negative impact is felt in, for instance, the student experience? However, there is a further institutional concern – if the semi-outsourcing model is fully adopted and evolves, it may be a requirement to have a new institutional entity (Online Studies School) which acts as the central project manager and residence for the third space professionals.

5. Contextualisation and Discussion

Each of the seven models discussed above requires a level of resource commitment. In our study, the participants, however, suggested that the decision by the leadership team on the choice of model for the development of online provision is solely based on a single factor of 'time'. Our participants suggested that this is valid for the Russell Group and Red Brick Universities. However, the post-1992 universities focus on the level of resources required when selecting the model. Figure 3 shows the time needed for developing each model in relation to the requirement of institutional resource commitment and impact on strategic pedagogical development.

Figure 3: Relationship Between Required Development Time, IRC and SPD



Authors own work

Time could play a crucial role in making decision on selecting the optimal model for the institution. The models that take less time could have a detrimental effect on the SPD and the long-term success of online provision. In the ideal world, a hybridstandardised model and semi-outsourcing would be the models to choose when developing the online provision. However, taking into account the external and internal financial and non-financial pressures, our participants suggest that the HEI should consider all three factors *i.e.*, resources commitment, long-term strategic benefit (SPD), and time. A decision made solely based on any two factors would not provide an optimal solution for the institution. Our participants also asserted that the institution should consider one model for short-term growth and then transition onto another model for long-term progress. Once the online provision is established using a model that suits the time and IRC available to the institution, the institution can start transitioning to a model chosen for the long term that provides better SPD. The aim of this study is to explore and document the models HEIs use to balance strategic pedagogical development with optimal institutional resource commitment within their pre-defined time requirements for developing, maintaining, and delivering online materials. We have listed the seven models and their causal connexion with the time requirements, IRC needs and SPD advantages. Our findings are underpinned in the lived experiences of academic and professional services colleagues who have worked in the UK HEIs that developed the online distance learning provisions. While our one of kind study is useful to the HEIs that are planning to enter the online distance learning HE market, it is also beneficial to HEIs that are currently operating one of the seven listed models.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Currently there is absence of studies within the literature that map out and comparatively analyse the frameworks and models used by UK HEIs for developing online provisions. Further, there is an absence of studies that contextualise these models for development of online provision within the timescale, resource commitments, strategic pedagogical development perspectives and their implications. Our study extends the current literature (Shaw *et al.*, 2020; Sundt, 2019; Wekullo, 2017) that mainly focuses on the implications of the OPM model which is used by Russel Group Universities. While other studies (Whitchurch, 2023; Baltaru, 2022a; McCowan, 2017; Macfarlane, 2011) look at the operational and managerial challenges of outsourcing or effects of bunding and re-bundling of academic duties on the culture and productivity in isolation to other alternative models.

This study answers the research question by providing strategic recommendations to HEIs on developing online provision. We highlight 7 distinct models that are currently used within the UK context, and we identify different implications of each model on quality, efficiency, growth and long term sustainability. A key strength of this study is the comparative narrative for balancing strategic pedagogical development (SPD) with institutional resource commitment (IRC) while simultaneously taking into account time constraints for each model. Overall, this research answers the research by conducting a comparative examination of models used by UK HEIs.

Our study, therefore, provides the foundational narrative required for a critical reflection on the model used within the current online provisions of HEIs. This critical reflection is essential for the continuous and sustainable growth of online degree programmes.

This study has several policy implications for HEIs around the world that aim to develop the online provision. This is a unique research enquiry that lists the model and strategies currently adopted for such development and their implications. It also provides narrative on each model through which HEIs can select a strategy that aligns with their development goal. HEIs trying to develop online provisions can strategically select the relevant model listed in this study. This research also provides information on the academic workload and engagement required in each model, which is also a key factor in selecting the correct model. Our study is also relevant to the quality teams within the HEIs, as it provides foundations for creating a quality assurance framework that aligns with the type of model used for development of online education. The type of model selected will also inform the upskilling and staff development needed within the model. Overall, our study shows that the selection of correct model requires considering factors beyond strategic partnerships and financial considerations. It requires strategic review of university's current infrastructure, resource commitment, staff development and pedagogical considerations, along with the factors discussed above for informed decision making and development. Universities also need to strategically balance the need for short term growth with long term sustainability, while selecting the model(s).

This study also has relevance to government bodies that regulate the higher education sector. We recommend that government bodies like QAA UK should publish guidelines on adoption of the various models for development of online provision. This study also provides a lens for analysing the alignment between policies, practices and goals set for development of online provisions. The strategic approaches selected by the HEIs also need to be match the resource requirements and time constraints with the long-term goals. Furthermore, this study is conducted in the context of UK, while the use of these models may vary across the world. Therefore, we recommend future research that provides a comparative analysis across countries. We also suggest an analysis

on the relationship between university ranking and reputation with different modules used to develop online learning.

At the time of this study, we did not come across any other model of developing online provision, apart from the ones listed in Table 1. However, we recommend further studies to be conducted on models and approaches used in other countries, especially Americas and Australasia. We also recommend future studies that look at the models used for development by universities, in context of global University rankings, profitability and disciplines offered within online provision. This is also a further limitation of our study, as we did not take into account the standing and ranking of HEI who used these models for development. We also did not take into account the discipline and level of degree programme offered within the development of online provision. There is also need for further research on the implication of each of the model on the staff and student experience and wellbeing, along with the equitability of learning experience within each of the model.

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