Managing expectations and developing trust: An evaluation of a public–private partnership

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Changing learner demographics and requirements are driving an increase in the range of private education available in the higher education sector. To stay current, universities may need to adapt to learner needs and rethink how they deliver education. This case study evaluates a model of delivery that is a collaboration between a traditional public university and a private education provider to design and deliver online education for a specific demographic where the private provider undertakes the online teaching and collaborates with the university on the design. Initial evidence suggests that the partnership model has the potential to work well with good communication and adjustments from both sides, including addressing assumptions about preparedness for online. Early indications further suggest that this model facilitates rapid change and deeper understanding about online learning and that it brings shared benefits and rewards.

Implications for practice or policy:

- Public–private partnerships can address the needs of a new demographic of learner and enable universities to focus on core business while meeting a wide range of user needs.
- Commercial drivers can enable rapid change and facilitate the understanding of online learning for academic staff more familiar with campus-based delivery.
- Communication, adjustment of practice and trust between partners is critical for success.

Keywords: public–private partnership, online learning, learning design, collaborative design, case study

The changing landscape of universities and the rise of public–private partnerships

The higher education sector has undergone profound change over the last 2 decades, influenced by a range of societal changes. This is set to increase and relates to changes in student population, alternative pathways to education and online education (Brown et al., 2020). With regards to student population, this has led to increased student diversity, both in relation to diversity among domestic students as part of a widening participation agenda and in terms of increased internationalisation (Harwood et al., 2017; Killick, 2017; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019). In parallel with changing student demographics, the increasing speed of changes in digital technology has had a significant impact on society, the nature of work and thus on higher education. These changes have created the possibility of offering higher education programs online, which then allows for recruitment across borders and time zones and potential expansion of higher education markets (Schendel & McCowan, 2016).

At the same time, competition for student enrolments has increased, and once relatively stable local markets are now no longer a given. As Salmon (2019) has highlighted, "across the higher education sector, aspirations to internationalise the student body, transform approaches to education, increase student recruitment and generate revenue are all on the agenda". Notably, over the last decade, private education has grown faster than publicly owned and funded institutions, because private institutions are expanding to meet market demands not met by public institutions (Marshall, 2014; Middlehurst, 2016).

With the rapid changes in online education across the higher education sector and the accelerated urgency in a COVID-19 context (Green et al., 2020; Ross, 2020), there is perhaps a sense of inevitability about the need for public universities to work with private partners in some capacity to ensure that universities are ready to meet the needs of a modern learner. This, in turn, may have a far-reaching impact on higher

education when it comes to collaboration, trust and online learning design; yet, there appears to be limited literature that explores the impact of such partnerships. We position this paper as an early addition to this discussion, as we evaluate the first steps in a new partnership between an Australian university and a private provider from the perspective of those involved. We further explore the challenges this partnership presents and the opportunities it may offer into the future. The key question is: to what extent can public–private partnerships help to improve learning design and outcomes for universities when increasing their online learning offerings?

Literature review

Brown at al. (2020, p. 11) argued that "institutions must rethink their degree pathways to accommodate a changing student demographic and employment landscape" and noted that "online education is increasingly seen as a scalable means to provide courses to an increasingly non-traditional student population". They went as far as to say that "future models of higher education, as well as future practices in teaching and learning, will need to adapt to these trends and fundamentally rethink what higher education *is*" (p. 11). Although this seems inevitable, universities have not always been quick to respond to these changes (Marshall, 2014). The amplified pressures due to COVID-19 have highlighted significant challenges for universities, particularly in terms of the ability of academic staff to design online learning environments and to teach in such environments. As Sutton and DeSantis (2017) noted, "the pace of educational technology innovation outpaces many professors' abilities to thoughtfully integrate new tools in their teaching practice" (p. 223). This is reinforced by Kunz and Cheek's (2016, p. 109) suggestion that academics have "learned their discipline but not pedagogy", which affects their ability to develop and facilitate quality online learning experiences. This often goes beyond mere ability and is related to conceptions of teaching with technology, which in turn relates to prior knowledge, experience and attitudes towards teaching and learning with technology (Englund et al., 2017). There are also examples that suggest faculty members are reluctant to consider new ways of working (Farakish et al., 2020). In this context, universities are often framed as slow, monolithic organisations that struggle to keep up with changes beyond their walled gardens. "Academics, essential to the existence of the university, are stereotyped as opposed to any change, unreasonably resisting any new idea or technology" (Marshall, 2018, p. 3).

This reluctance can be set against the overall context, which is impacted by fast-changing technology to varying degrees, as reflected in "the market economy and the neoliberal paradigm, emerging global markets of higher education, local and global inequalities, changing forms of educational governance, and emerging business models" (Swinnerton et al., 2020, p. 19). In other words, universities, and especially academic staff within them, are portrayed as potential constraints who are holding universities back in terms of capitalising on the potential of educational technology to transform higher education (Conole, 2014). In their review of a public–private partnership, Farakish et al. (2020) found a significant culture clash, with some faculty members highly concerned about the private partners' influence on curriculum and the intellectual property of learning materials, while also being sceptical about the value of teaching online. Yet, online education is becoming increasingly ubiquitous across higher education (Kunz & Cheek, 2016).

This overall context and gaps in expertise have opened up opportunities for private providers to position themselves as agile and technologically ready to deliver flexible programs. The notion of partnership becomes salient here, as market-savvy private institutions can provide the much-needed agility and technological nous, while universities can provide the discipline-based content and expertise. In an increasingly competitive online higher education market, it is often essential for universities to get relevant online courses to market quickly (Kunz & Cheek, 2016), and a partnership can offer a fast-tracked route to this market. For example, many private providers have emerged to support the development of massive open online courses, such as FutureLearn, Coursera and edX, all of whom were initially seen as competitors but are now positioned as university partners (Ferguson et al., 2016; Ong & Grigorian, 2015). Importantly, however, universities are not separate from society, but are implicated in changes in society. Higher education has historically occupied a crucial position in modern societies, and it is therefore important to recognise and reflect on its key strengths into the future (Barnett, 2014, 2015, 2017; Bengtsen & Barnett, 2018).

At the same time however, "modern universities operate within an intensely political space. The price of the success of a university in contributing to the social and economic wellbeing of modern society is the need to respond to a range of stakeholders" (Marshall, 2018, p. 3). Striking a balance between retaining

what gives the university its unique value (i.e., knowledge production) and imparting that knowledge in rewarding and effective ways (i.e., learning and teaching) is therefore the main challenge. Universities are not necessarily in the best position to do both at all times, and in all contexts, especially when it comes to teaching online. In addition, the process of imparting knowledge is increasingly being fragmented into smaller chunks that are packaged into different formats, for example in the form of micro-credentials.

Universities' traditional reputation and status as knowledge producers has been fundamental to the societal value afforded to university degrees, especially when it comes to employment negotiations in the labour market for their graduates. However, "an ecosystem of micro-credentials is emerging as an alternative or supplement to the degree, perhaps in tune with employers who have dispensed with degrees as prerequisites for employment on the grounds that degree transcripts are not particularly useful, and that university records are not good predictors of employment success" (Milligan & Kennedy, 2017, p. 41). What the world needs, in Oliver's (2019, p. 1) words, is "more granular certified learning". However, this is not what universities are necessarily equipped to provide, nor does it necessarily require a complete overhaul of the way universities operate. It is more productive to conceptualise this as a diversification of universities' roles and a potential expansion of their target markets, and it can co-exist with more traditional degrees (Bailey et al., 2018).

In this context of diversification and rapid digital change, the idea of universities partnering with private, specialised providers creates significant potential. As Salmon (2019) has argued, "working in new types of partnerships in preparation for innovative learning futures brings shared benefits and rewards – and spreads risks across both parties" (¶ 4). The idea of more comprehensive partnerships, specifically as related to digital learning and teaching, has therefore generated considerable interest (Swinnerton et al., 2020). Indeed, the concept of outsourcing services is not a new idea in higher education (Gupta et al., 2005). Traditionally, outsourcing focused on ancillary services, whereas with partnership we are moving to outsource core services. Although partnerships potentially allow for specialised skills and knowledge to be leveraged and applied most effectively, they also present a range of challenges. To be effective, they require good communication and, above all, trust. Farakish et al. (2020) noted that partnerships fail as often as they succeed (p. 251), in part due to the inability to develop trust. However, they suggested that a range of structural measures can be established to facilitate the development of both trust and beneficial partnerships, which we explore from the perspectives of those involved.

Given the relative novelty of the different configurations of partnerships related to online higher education, we borrow, adapt and partially apply a conceptual partnership framework from the public health discipline, namely the partnership, engagement and collaboration framework (Huang et al., 2018), which allows us to analyse partnerships on different institutional levels and through different stages. The institutional levels of partnership consist of consumer-provider (i.e., student-teacher/university), implementation team (i.e., university learning designers-private partner's learning designers), and sustainment/support (i.e., organisation-level arrangements to sustain the partnership) (Huang et al., 2018). Each of these levels and stages involves the development of trust and mutual expectations, and the level of alignment between the levels and stages may be a good indicator of the sustainability of the partnership into the future. As noted, the case study we report on in this paper is in its early stages; therefore, the sustainability of the partnership will eventually be measured over the longer term.

Methodology

This paper considers the lessons emerging and early impact of a public university and private provider partnership in Australia where the private partner delivers online accredited courses on behalf of the university. Insights are drawn from interviews with staff as part of a wider study into digital learning. The evaluation takes the form of a case study (Freebody, 2003; Yin, 2009), which focuses in particular on partnership: how it was established and how it has developed since. According to Stake (1995), "case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi). In our context, the case study explores complexity related to varying expectations from both sides of the partnership arrangement, in particular from those who operate at the teaching and learning design coalface.

This is a small-scale study with eight participants (*N* = 8). Data collection was undertaken via semi-structured recorded interviews. A range of staff were interviewed, consisting of employees of the private partner involved in the learning design process and learning and teaching professionals and academic staff (subject experts) from the university who have engaged in the design process with the private partner. The focus of data collection was at the level of the implementation team, with the exception of an interview with the digital manager (the level of sustainment/support). Semi-structured interviews allow for a focus on issues that are meaningful for participants, thus allowing diverse perceptions to be expressed (Cridland et al., 2015; Kallio et al., 2016), which was particularly important in the context of the partnership experience in this case study.

Table 1
Participants in data collection

Interviewee	Reference in paper
Senior learning designer, private partner	P1
Learning designer, private partner	P2
Learning designer A, university	P3
Learning designer B, university	P4
Academic 1, university	P5
Academic 2, university	P6
Academic 3, university	P7
Digital manager, university	P8

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to summarise and structure key features of the data to enable clear reporting (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2), and helped us identify common themes mentioned by respondents from the university and the private partner. While the flexibility of thematic analysis can lead to inconsistency (Nowell et al., 2017), the small number of participants reduced this risk and indeed provided a rich data set with consistent themes.

In addition to the interview data, we have been involved in the academic design of partnered, partially outsourced programs, and our reflections on the process are included in the general analysis. As noted, this is a relatively small case study and a critical evaluation of the initial foray into a public–private partnership, which serves to inform future and ongoing research into this phenomenon in an area where there is limited existing research, but which looks set to be of growing importance for many tertiary institutions, particularly in a post-COVID-19 context where resources may be limited, especially in the short term.

While some of the original interviews took place prior to COVID-19 and before all university content went online, reflective updates were sought in light of changing circumstances. Interview data was thematically analysed and is discussed in relation to conceptual themes. These themes are reflected in the subheadings of the section that follows.

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the university human ethics department as part of a larger study evaluating digital learning at the university.

Designing for online – learning to work together in partnership

The public–private model

As noted, many universities are currently exploring partnerships with private providers for different reasons. Such partnerships are often highly specialised and relate to the use of a particular type of software, a learning management system such as Blackboard or a specific service such as Studiosity. However, the partnership in this case study is a more comprehensive partnership that requires ongoing collaboration across complete and iterative design-teach-evaluation cycles. It does not focus only on one element of the learning and teaching process but rather on the whole process, and therefore involves different levels of partnership as outlined earlier (Huang et al., 2018). This also means that the partnership must be engaged in and cannot be avoided by those involved in the cycle outlined. In the first instance, this means relinquishing a certain degree of control, as the partner has their own ideas about what constitutes good learning and teaching online. This occurs at the level of the implementation team, after the initial arrangements at the organisational level have been established.

In this evaluation, we consider a single example of a substantive partnership between a private provider and a traditional university. The partner delivers what they call an "end-to-end service" – the course on behalf of the university – using the services of an online learning advisor. The online content is designed by the university course staff team (academic teachers) working with a professional learning design team provided by the partner. Although this partnership model is not new for the provider, it is a new undertaking for the university in this case study, which is a predominately a campus-based teaching and research institution.

The partnership affords an opportunity to move rapidly and professionally into an online learning market targeted at postgraduates and professionals who want to upskill or expand their resume. In this model, the private provider designs and delivers the courses and undertakes the marketing, enrolment and delivery. As this is a partnership, the university manages the relationship through academic oversight of the course design, course content, assessment moderation and academic regulation (sustainment/support level). The prospectus is designed to complement offerings from the university and expand the market for the benefit of both partners. The partnership should appear seamless to the students, who are effectively university students, albeit under the tutelage of the private provider (consumer-provider level).

The learners are thus an online cohort of the university, but there are key differences in the student experience. While the private provider courses co-exist with on-campus delivery, and while learning and assessment is based on the same learning outcomes, the delivery model is different. The private provider offers courses that are shorter in duration and are delivered more frequently than those delivered by the university, which suits the target market. For academic staff at the university, this means designing for course delivery across 8 weeks of teaching with two consolidation periods, instead of a traditional 13-week semester. For discipline-based academics, who are often highly content focused, this is a significant adjustment.

The scale of this partnership is ambitious, with a range of programs across all faculties delivered by the partner and expanding. Decisions about which programs to deliver are made at a senior level at the university and negotiated with the partner. Course delivery is across a 4-term year, rather than two semesters. Professional services such as student registration, curriculum approval and exam boards have therefore had to amend their processes to enable alignment with the partner's delivery schedules. In addition, the allocation of time for academic staff at the university to work with the partner to design content is based on meeting this delivery schedule. At the outset, there was an expectation that most of the work would be undertaken by the partner design team during a rapid design approach known as a design sprint, an intensive 3-week collaboration of university subject experts with the partner's learning design team to develop online content for the course.

Managing and resetting expectations

In the early days of this partnership, it became clear to both parties that unrealistic assumptions were made about the university's readiness for moving online. The partner design team found that academic subject experts were mostly unprepared with regards to content and curriculum that could be delivered online. In hindsight, this was not entirely surprising, as the university has hitherto been a face-to-face institution first and foremost, with on-campus teaching being the primary teaching model and school leavers being the primary cohort. This resulted in the university being initially unprepared for a design sprint, which caused delays and required more intensive support from both sides and a resetting of expectations. The main issue was the preparation of curriculum for online delivery and what that represented on both sides of the partnership at the level of the implementation team.

In order to deliver shorter time frames and focused online learning, the partner expected clear outcomes with purposeful content in a structured modular format, which is not a model that university staff had engaged with. In traditional delivery, academic subject experts developed an overview of the course, with staff often planning sessions "on the hoof" to suit learner needs. Large parts of the course content were not necessarily available from the outset, although there was an expectation on the part of the private partner that much of what was required would be available on the virtual learning platform, which was not the case. Thus, preparing an entire course for online delivery was not simply a matter of moving content from one learning management system to another, but a significantly more involved process. This caused confusion among subject expert academic staff and, importantly, additional workload for both parties. Within the

partnership, engagement and collaboration framework (Huang et al., 2018), the partnership at this level has some way to go before enough mutual trust will be established to move to the engagement and collaboration stages.

There was also some confusion about the role of the learning design team. In the traditional university, the learning design teams support the design of learning and assessment, based on informed and evidence-based pedagogy. Academic teachers expected similar input from the partner's learning design team but found the experience quite different: "I guess their limitations are they are a service in terms of putting your work online, putting your unit online, and they don't actually develop any of the content themselves". The partner's design team are focused on the intensive design model and instructional design for the learner; their focus was primarily on the presentation and accessibility of the visual end design, "it's more about transforming and putting something online, rather than working with you and work out the structure or content of your course". Some academic teachers therefore had to go back to the drawing board to rethink their course for online delivery. They could not simply hand over the content as a package; rather, they had to engage with the process on a much deeper level.

Rethinking how a course works in an online environment was a challenge for those who had never tried it before. Academic teachers commented on how the process forced them to think about learner engagement for an online environment with a much shorter delivery time frame and what resources were needed. Learning and teaching staff noted that this was part of some difficult conversations at the start of the collaboration, where academic subject experts were often unclear about what to use as a resource in such an unfamiliar setting and would suggest things like video, without indicating what needed to be in the video. P8's account is an example of this:

> They don't really have a great understanding of what they're actually trying to do.
> I want a video,
> What do you want in the video?... What's it about?
> Doesn't somebody write the shooting script for me?
> Well, they can help but they need to know what it is you want
> I just thought we'd talk.
> What do you want to talk about?

The partner's design staff suggested that the real wins came at the end, where academic teachers experienced "lightbulb moments" when they would see the completed online activities and understood what was being created and achieved and how it could be improved; P1 suggested that:

> You have this lightbulb moment and it's when they first see some of their content actually built … and that's where you have them often switch into a collaborative mode and they go, "Oh, wait, and if I change my content to be like this, it would work even better in the platform. And why don't you try this [additional activity for the design]?"

Academic teachers agreed that the initial process was very challenging and time-intensive but they were ultimately very pleased with the results.

The collaborative model – developing trust, supporting autonomy, and sharing control

Within this new partnership, the private partner proved adept at adjusting and adapting their processes to meet the needs of the university's academic teachers while keeping to their strict timescales. As it became clear to all parties that the timescales of a 3-week intensive design sprint were not realistic, and that some academic teachers needed more one-on-one support prior to the sprint, the partner adapted their processes to work one-on-one with the teacher to develop the design and meet the deadlines. From the partner's point of view, the way the partnership is presented to the academic is critical to the development of trust and collaboration: "once you get that collaboration going, it's so much more fun for everybody and we just get so much more exciting learning happening" (P2).

The partner staff acknowledge that each course academic is different, with different approaches and beliefs about their course design: "We don't ever want to be the tail wagging the dog. I think it's always got to be us coming and meeting where they [academic teachers] are at" (P1). Furthermore, they are aware that the

design sprint can "seem like an outside review of your work” (P2), so an important part of the communication between partners is focused on managing expectations and insecurities. Again, this is the recurring and consistent theme of the importance of developing trust at the level of the implementation team, with the aim of genuine collaboration in the long run.

Partner staff shared an example of working with content-focused academic teachers who wanted the design team to use lengthy slide sets and ask students to engage with 30–40 readings during the course. This was not suitable for the focused online delivery model and the timescale of delivery and was a difficult conversation to have with subject experts who thought everything they had served a crucial purpose. They suggested that developing a shared understanding between the partner’s learning design team and subject experts takes time and involves challenging conversations. Only once the final design was complete, did the partner’s learning design team gain the academic’s trust and sense of reward for the time and effort invested. However, they acknowledged that the whole process could be a difficult one for academic teachers to go through: “we’ve had some really fantastic relationships that we've built that didn't start off that way” (P1).

This difficulty partly stems from the fact that the partner may be perceived to be encroaching on an area that academics traditionally have full control over, namely their discipline content and knowledge. This knowledge, and how to teach it, are fundamental elements of academic identity, so handing this over to the partner can be perceived as relinquishing control and therefore requires a potential identity adjustment (Flecknoe et al., 2017; Perkins, 2019). Conversely, some academics may perceive their main identity to be that of an academic researcher, in which case any additional teaching time required, for example, in the form of needing to (re)develop material for an online context, potentially creates tension around workload (Mitten & Ross, 2018). “There was a lot of fear and concern that obviously things were going to get ripped away from academics and this was really going to compromise what they’d been doing for a long period of time” (P4).

Given these initial tensions around expectations around time and content, the partner adapted their preparation launch events to emphasise the need for planning prior to the sprint. They use launch events to try to build an early relationship with the academic teacher by explaining the added value they bring in terms of rich design and accessibility and also by sharing the examples that they have developed from the early stages. As the partnership matures, the partner will have more examples to share and more experience in how to pitch the process to the academic teacher; however, they acknowledged that there needed to be more emphasis on how to think and plan curriculum for an online learning environment.

> The sprint model is a really great model to adopt for the learning designers and the people building the material, but the sprint isn’t the most important bit for the academics; the bit before the sprint is the important bit for the academics and it took us ... Once we were into the third round it was like, “hang on a minute”, don’t sell the sprint to anybody because if you leave the learning design and the real thinking about the unit until the sprint, we’re all dead in the water. (P1)

The university learning and teaching team acknowledged that the planning stage takes far more time than is currently allocated to academic staff, to enable them to move from a traditional face-to-face to a fully online mode. Yet, academic teachers suggested that curriculum design was a key area where they needed support. Unfortunately, this element was not factored into the costing of the partnership, leaving some learning and teaching team members expressing frustration that they are generally unable to offer their expertise during the process, as they are guided not to by their managers, because from a managerial point of view, it is seen as “the partner’s job” (P3). This is the source of most of the frustration in the partnership, and it means that the work involved in redesigning the curriculum for an online environment falls to the academic teacher who has to create the content, while the partner design team visualises the learning design within very tight timescales. This may be one of the biggest risks in this partnership, and it occurs at the level of the implementation team; yet, it can only be addressed at the level of sustainment/support.

Not everyone struggled with the process. One academic subject expert who has gone through the design process was positive about their overall experience and found working with the partner to be efficient:

> I was told that they were very efficient, and they were, and I think they have a very good model for producing and developing the content very quickly and efficiently ... and the people I worked with [at the partner] were great to work with, they communicated well, they took time and they had good ideas for how to actually present the information and activities. (P5)

The partner design team was seen as highly effective with their communication throughout the process, and the only concerns that emerged for the academic teacher were about the partner's limitations with regards to understanding the content and structure of the course. When the partner design team tried to find resources to make the content engaging, the resources they selected were often less robust than a subject expert would have chosen, in terms of academic rigour. This was a common response from academic teachers involved in the process and reiterates the need for curriculum and content planning prior to the final design sprint.

After 1 year of the partnership, the partner design team suggested that the process was improving and so too were the outcomes (the design of courses). They suggested that the continuous exposure to the process was enabling both sides to understand the partnership better, which in turn placed them in a better position to address risks before they become issues. Design sprints were becoming "less of a Groundhog Day" (P1), and they (the partner) were learning how best to explain what was required for their intensives (or design sprints) at a much earlier stage. Academic teachers and learning and teaching university staff agreed that the finished design was professional and engaging and that having all content available from the outset is a good model of delivery for the target cohort of students. This suggests that the partnership may be moving closer to the engagement and collaboration phases.

Meeting the needs of a new student demographic

As with all new partnerships, not all players involved are necessarily happy about the arrangements. For example, some academic staff involved in the process questioned the need for the partnership at all. They expressed confusion about why the university could not just supply online courses without the need for a private partnership. "The process is great but there are questions as to why we outsource this process – it would be great to have a team that could get it through in a similar time frame" (P5).

Based on both our own experience as contributors to this partnership and the interview analysis, we suggest that the partnership is changing both administrative and academic processes. This change is happening much more quickly than likely would have occurred if it had been set up as an internal project. Adding a partner who comes with their own processes and strict timelines has the advantage of speeding up various processes that might otherwise get bogged down in committee structures and bureaucracy. The commercially focused model that this partner is working within creates pressures around student demand for courses, rolling enrolments and time frames for professional design teams, which means that these courses need to be completed on schedule and that the partner project teams working with the university teams need to ensure that all parties meet the set deadlines. We question whether this could work if arranged internally without the external impetus and drive that come from working in a commercial partnership (Farakish et al., 2020).

As noted earlier, universities may need to consider how to accommodate a changing demographic (Brown et al., 2020; Christensen et al., 2004), and it is clear from early internal data analysis that the students who are interested in these online courses are a different demographic to those who normally enrol at the university. The students who enrolled in our partner programs were predominately postgraduate students, keen to use the qualification for career purposes, who needed to study online and did not have time to engage in anything beyond what was directed. Early feedback from the student body on the new model has been positive, and enrolments are also increasing overall, which suggests that at the level of consumer-provider, the partnership is beginning to bear fruit.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored to what extent public–private partnerships can help to improve learning design and outcomes for universities when increasing their online learning offerings, which has gained an increased urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic.

New models of learning and COVID-19

We opened this paper noting that the higher education sector has undergone profound change, and this has particularly been emphasised during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, which occurred during the writing of the paper in March and April 2020. As the university has had to rapidly adapt to teaching online, some of our original participants were asked whether their experience in working with the private partner had had any impact on their subsequent "forced pivot" to online learning and teaching.

Members of the learning and teaching team at the university have noticed that most academic staff who had not shown much interest in online learning design in the past were much more willing to engage in meaningful conversations about online assessment, content delivery and student engagement and technologies. Importantly, however, those who had engaged with the partner had a more nuanced understanding of online delivery and much greater confidence, which was useful amid dramatic and continuous changes. Academics who had worked with the partner prior to COVID-19 found it helpful to have gone through the process, which they felt had enabled them to develop something of value to students in an online learning environment:

> Thinking about how to deliver activities in an asynchronous way was really helpful. It was also helpful in just giving me the confidence to decide to do things online even without COVID[-19], just more blended or flipped approaches. I feel more confident that I can delivery something of value to the students in a non-traditional way. (P7)

The partners suggested they had experienced continuous improvement throughout their partnership with the university; however, this reflection is about their experience of working with academic subject experts and the processes at the university. Further research needs to be undertaken to fully understand the impact that the partnership has had on academic subject experts and how the relationship will progress beyond the initial design stage. In other words, more research is needed into the factors that impact on the different levels (consumer-provider, implementation team, and sustainment/support) of the partnership (Huang et al., 2018), to ultimately establish a strong sustainable collaboration. At this stage, there are no guarantees that this will indeed be achieved.

Lessons emerging and limitations of this study

Overall, it appears that in these initial stages of this public–private partnership, the benefits for both sides look promising. The courses are being delivered to growing numbers of students, who are largely positive about their experience, and academic moderation shows positive outcomes overall.

The impact of the partnership has enabled a push for the university into flexible online learning, and it appears to have attracted a new demographic to its higher education offerings. It also aligns with its strategic direction of moving into digital learning and developing a digital campus. Outsourcing, when implemented well, can produce benefits for an institution, such as reduced costs, improved service quality and increased efficiency and innovation (Gupta et al., 2005); and while thus far, the full potential of this partnership has not yet been reached, as the processes for design are still being adapted and refined to suit both parties, the likelihood that a workable model that suits all parties will be reached looks promising, especially for specific non-traditional cohorts of students. This partnership thus serves a particular niche at this early stage. It is possible that this niche will be expanded or that other niches may be found, but the partnership model may not suit all learning and teaching contexts at the university, nor was it meant to do so.

Working in "new types of partnerships in preparation for innovative learning futures brings shared benefits and rewards" (Salmon, 2019, ¶ 4). This partnership is an early lesson on what might be required for developing online education in the traditional university, and early findings suggest that the partnership has produced some positive results in the form of positive student feedback. However, more research into the

ongoing impact on subject expert staff in designing for online learning environments is required. For example, longitudinal studies will be able to show the longer-term effects on the way learning design is organised across the university. Furthermore, while this paper has presented a case study at one particular institution, the partner has also entered into similar partnerships at other institutions, so a comparative study could provide more in-depth data across different contexts and cohorts of students.

Overall, it appears from this exploratory study that public–private partnerships have the potential to revolutionise higher education, especially if the model is scaled up across the university. In this instance, we have identified that it is important for the university academic teaching team to maintain a level of ownership and autonomy over the design of the curriculum for learning, as well as oversight over the development of high-quality learning environments. Without this, there is a risk of technological determinism, rather than pedagogical principles, guiding the learning experience as the private staff are not the subject experts and do not bring the required academic rigour to the process. The added value of universities is highly specialised discipline expertise, contained within their academic staff and based on cutting-edge research. Partnerships such as the one discussed in this paper need to find a careful balance between being efficient in online learning design and leveraging the expertise that adds the university "X factor", in order to avoid becoming a production line of training modules. The ideal outcome of the partnership is the right combination of efficiency, engaging and challenging content and a constructively aligned curriculum design that links the course learning outcomes and assessment tasks with an appealing and engaging final visual design.

The findings of the case study presented here suggest that this is an iterative process that will take some time to perfect, as both partners' expectations are adjusted in ongoing evaluative cycles, ultimately aiming for sustainable collaboration. At the level of the implementation team, the misunderstandings about the role of a learning designer between the university and partner serve as an example of the assumptions made on both sides that did not translate into a reality. The university must continue to work on the curriculum and be aware that the learning design role provided by the partners leans more towards an instructional design role in that they make the curriculum visually appealing but do not help rethink curriculum development for online delivery. Finding the right balance is the mission that will lead to the refinement of the partnership, and this probably needs to happen at the organisational level of sustainment/support. The commercial arrangements that form the basis of the partnership have not been discussed as they are beyond the scope of this paper, but they clearly are a significant contributing factor to whether the partnership will ultimately succeed or not.

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