

# Leading with direction and uncertainty: change within an online education team

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## Abstract

Within the UK higher education sector, there is a strategic interest in establishing fully online education to provide greater flexibility to learners, drive innovation in pedagogy, and support financial sustainability (Skelton, 2023). To achieve these strategic ambitions, institutions need to build capacity in infrastructure, operational and educational support (Vivolo, 2020). Adopting a critical reflective approach, this presentation explores the leadership of a large team of online education professionals during a time of rapid growth and change in strategic direction within a UK university. The implementation of partnership working and leadership responses to enable institutional strategy will be explored, focusing on the educational aspects of new programme design and development, and a participatory model for team change.

Drawing upon the strengths of an established open access online portfolio, the University of Leeds set a strategic direction for growth in fully online postgraduate programmes and professional learning. To achieve this ambition required a significant shift in the direction and purpose of the institutions' central online learning team, taking a stronger lead on programme-level design and emphasising the student learning experience. Pre-existing models of course development were difficult to scale and the use of new platforms and pedagogical approaches for different disciplines needed a flexible, yet consistent approach. Through a substantial and participatory change programme, the team explored its values, ways of working and approach to collaboration to enable new opportunities in online education. These changes continue and reflect a realisation that uncertainty accompanies direction, particularly within professional practice inherent in innovative digital education.

Leadership considerations included the relationship between individual professional identity and ownership of process, team motivations and institutional direction, and priorities for the student educational experience across different forms of online course. Of note, this session will explore the tensions that exist through adopting democratic leadership to 'unleash a greater capacity' within an organisation (Woods and Gronn, 2009) and the clarity of direction and change management required to empower distributed leadership models (Holt, et al., 2014). The specific nuances relating to the leadership of an online education team will be discussed, reflecting the 'socio-technical third space' occupied by digital education professionals in higher education institutions (White, et al., 2020), and the intention to empower and develop the team to bring their expertise to academic partnership working.

Participants in this session will take away personal lessons learnt from leading a large team through change and growth, and initial thoughts on a framework for positioning a learning technology or learning design team to support institutional strategy. There is synergy with the ALT Framework for Ethical Learning Technology (ALT, 2021), with themes crossing the boundaries of learning design, learning technology and leadership practice.

## References

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