

The Online Programme Enablement Model (OPE)

Developing Global Businesses in Education

In the last two decades, CAPDM has worked with many education providers to build viable, sustainable businesses in blended and online distance education.

We started out at Heriot-Watt University by producing the largest online distance MBA programme in the world, currently being studied by 10,000+ students. After spinning-out from there, we went on to build successful programmes for a number of other institutions including *ifs* University College; Edinburgh Napier University's Global Online Masters; the University of the West of Scotland's One World MBA; the British Council's Connecting Classrooms.

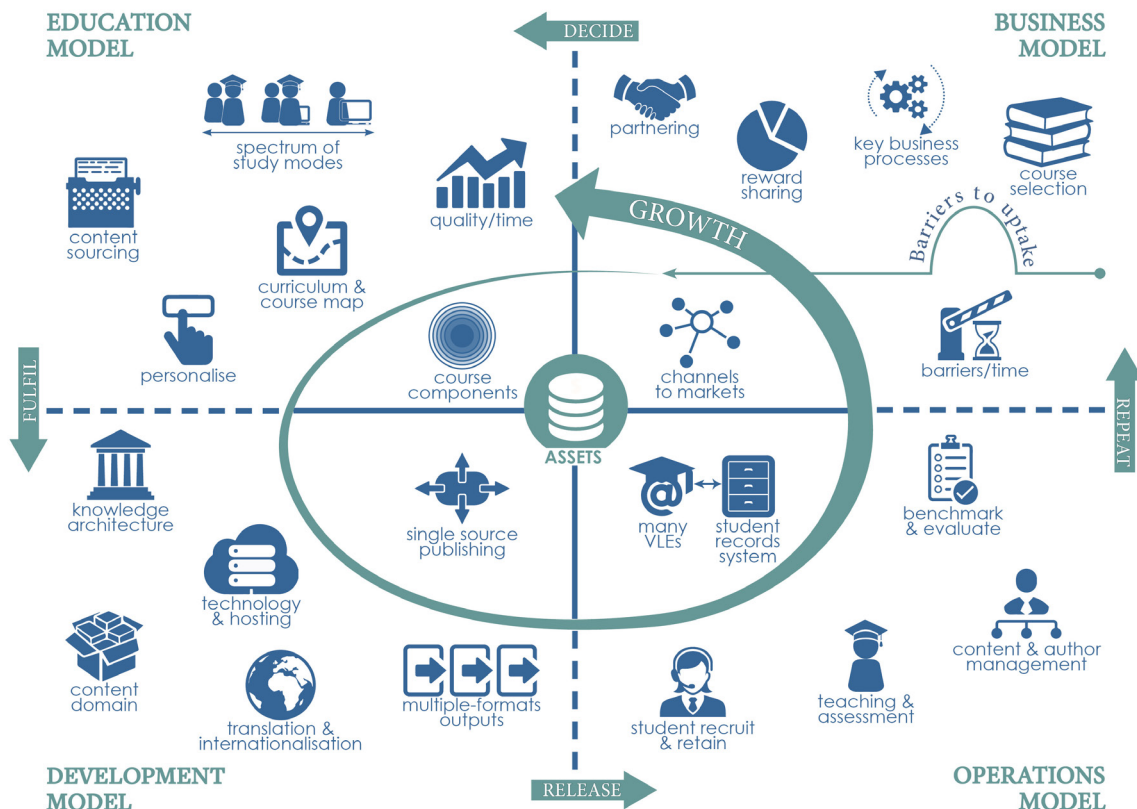
Currently we are working with London University's International Academy on a number of programmes, but including the UCL Masters in Professional Accountancy.

These programmes have one thing in common: they incorporate all the necessary elements required to build a sustainable business around online education. The approaches we take are holistic in nature, and are scalable and repeatable but without sacrificing quality. Details of the experience of these are written up in the many briefing papers and whitepapers on our web site (<http://www.capdm.com/resources>), but also summarised pictorially – the OPE diagram – to show the totality of the business considerations.

The OPE model's value is that it is a **holistic** summary of all the key processes that have to be identified, understood and implemented to establish a business within a college – the business of producing, delivering and managing programmes of online education. While it arose from one particular story, colleges can readily adapt their own specific version.

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Quadrants

There are four major dimensions to OPE:



Each of these contains a number of key issues to be identified and addressed. OPE does not explicitly address the fifth dimension of **Growth** which is a continuation of the first four dimensions, though integrates a new requirement. Growth is about:

- Scalability and repeatability of all the earlier OPE processes, e.g. to build a next programme or qualification
- improving administration and support
- integrating marketing and sales channels
- achieving financial viability and sustainability

The implementation of OPE lays down a solid foundation for this to happen in a managed and principled manner.

OPE's four dimensions, represented in quadrants, have an implied flow through them:

- The top two quadrants pin down the business and academic characteristics of the business to be developed
- The bottom two quadrants define the product and how it is operated.

At the heart of OPE is the set of **Assets** the business is built on. While it is tempting to think of the people involved as the primary asset (and people are certainly crucial to the success of OPE), the online distance learning (**ODL**) aspect of OPE puts the **learning materials** at the heart of the business. These are what is developed, cherished and delivered for the long term. Depending on the chosen programme design and delivery modes (online, blended and/or distance), they can form the primary interface for students in their interaction with the college, helping the business to scale up profitably.

1 Business

The first quadrant is about the Business Model that the business is to be governed by, including understanding the implications of some of the key decisions to be taken, e.g.:

- **Barriers to uptake:** From the very start many **barriers** will stand in the way of developments. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the primary one is that this is a new development, and what it proposes is new and represents change. Change is not appreciated by all. There is also the fear of the unknown.
- **Partnering has to be considered.** It can be difficult to direct use of the many capabilities within a college to coordinate to build a business. A college may not also have the required online distance learning experience, which is quite different from having an elearning support team. Partnering, at least in the short to medium term, is often required to ensure that all the **capability** identified is on hand and reliable. OPE is an important step towards identifying the capability required.
- **Key processes,** including downstream ones, have to be identified, understood and planned for. There can be very many regulatory issues to be resolved and revised, and there are potentially costly processes involving assessment and support to be carefully **planned**. For example, should teacher support and student contact be mandatory, or should it just be guaranteed to be available? There are major cost implications.
- **Reward sharing:** *“What’s in it for me?”* is the most commonly asked question you will hear when trying to persuade authors to take part. This **will** be asked, so prepare an answer to it, and an answer to how **rewards** are shared between school and college and how individuals could be rewarded. Success is not launch; it is the continued year-on-year running of a sustainable business and this requires a committed and motivated **team** performing over a long period of time.

2 Education

The second quadrant continues defining the overall characteristics, but this time the characteristics of the pedagogy. OPE is not necessarily synonymous with distance learning: it is about developing education and delivery options that support all study modes, whether on or off site. Key issues that should be considered include:

- **Standardised course templates within a programme.** In moving from a cottage industry to a business, it is necessary to have designs and production processes that are efficient, scalable and repeatable. It is also necessary to develop a **brand**, and hence a product that reflects the college. OPE represents a move from individually handcrafted course development to a position of scalability and repeatable quality. There will be a degree of standardisation of courses, but delivery should result in a consistent, exciting and rewarding student experience.
- **Content sourcing.** One of the biggest barriers faced by colleges developing ODL programmes is in producing the content required to support delivery. This is one reason that many ODL programmes are either blended or 'correspondence course' oriented with students buy texts as the core content. Whatever the model, all the required **content** has to be sourced, e.g. authored specifically, contracted out, purchased from a publisher, etc. It is crucial to identify and source the core content.
- **Personalised delivery.** There is no single right way to deliver education to a market of individual learners, so one goal should be to use the technologies available to deliver a range of learning **options** to students, but to personalise the learning experience. This should be available to support all study modes, not just purely online ones.
- **Improving quality.** One consequence of developing a rich, online delivered study option is that it provides a perfect infrastructure to support all study modes at a quality level that is both controllable and improvable. All students can be guaranteed a minimum student experience, which should be wholly adequate for the remote student to study from and pass any assessments. This experience could be enhanced with, for example, an inspiring teacher but quality should never be lowered in exceptional circumstances, e.g. by a poor teacher or perhaps a temporary stand-in. Quality should improve **constantly** over time.

3

Development

A key requirement is to be able to build and release a product. Development should be part of a cost and content controlled process that produces a smart looking deliverable in a scalable, repeatable and long-term manageable way. Short-circuiting this to produce a cheap and cheerful, but non-maintainable, product is fine for one-off productions, but does not fit into OPE for the long run.

Key to sustainable development is the manner in which course content assets are managed in order that they can be used, re-used, evolved and maintained cost-effectively over the years. The main issues to focus on here include:

- **An information architecture.** Content standards are crucial for the long term, specifically the use of a semantically-rich XML mark-up for textual content, and appropriate media standards for other objects. Content **must** be managed separately from how it is delivered: technology has a much shorter life time than well-design and written learning materials. If these materials are rich – in structure, metadata, and semantic interpretation – the technologists can deliver them in highly integrated and functional ways in a range of output formats and into various environments. It is essential to have a well worked **information strategy** that includes the design, development and management of a **repository** of content assets.
- **Content domains.** The core asset of an OPE business is these learning materials, so colleges should be prepared to become a publisher in their own right. An OPE business will gain huge efficiencies from careful management of its domains of content. These may equate to the content for a programme or for a department, but they should be **well managed**, be consistent, and in a form that allows them to be used and re-used.
- **Translations and internationalisation.** Most colleges will master and deliver a single product in English, but occasionally there may be a need to deliver in other languages or to internationalise sections to suit a particular segment of a market. Translations can be expensive so they should be carefully managed and should always produce **translation memories** as a by-product, particularly if there are regular updates. The use of open standards, such as XML, are important too as they can preserve the content structure of the translation. This ensures that they will be published to conform to the English master before being delivered globally.
- **Multi-format delivery.** It is inconceivable to think of delivering to a single format, given that students will want options, e.g. interactive online or print. In order to avoid making the mistake of developing courses within a specific technology (e.g. Flash or Moodle) it is highly advisable to hold content in standards and **outside of** any delivery system or format. In managing **semantically rich** content domains, delivery to any format or environment becomes possible – now and into the future.

4 Operations

The final quadrant is one that is often overlooked or assumed. Success after launch carries a requirement to be able to operate and administer a business that probably represents a big departure from the traditional business of a college. For example, an ODL business may be best rewarded if there is an open intake of students, rather than the traditional September only intake on-campus.

Most college IT systems are not flexible enough to accommodate many of the desired characteristics of an ODL programme, which may have quite different operational requirements from its traditional counterpart. Key issues to consider here generally include:

- **Integration with central administration services.** ODL often starts as a small venture by one or two individuals in a school, and central services are often happy for it to remain so. A OPE business in ODL has to be **fully integrated** into all the central services of a college, but in a much more automated way than is traditionally found. Full flexibility demands that much of the burden of enrolment and payment, perhaps on a modular basis, be put on the student. However, this requires systems to support this, and is one area where 'barriers' are most in evidence.
- **Student support.** This can be a very streamlined process, or it can be a very teacher-heavy one **depending** on decisions taken in quadrant one. For example, enforcing mandatory teacher contact has implications for scaling up an ODL business. It also possibly goes against the desires of an individual learner who may have chosen to study through ODL to minimise contact! Students will need support so it should be **guaranteed** when required. Online systems can also help with the management of support requests, to streamline the process and avoid holes. The flip side is that technology can also be dangerous: many systems, including email, can be highly unstructured and time wasting.
- **Content and author management.** There are new management tasks in an ODL business, including keeping content up to date and managing the people tasked with doing this. A OPE business may involve very many educators, so training and guidance becomes a necessary and ongoing task until such time as ODL represents a truly **transformational** change, i.e. permanent change, within a college. This is a management task that requires constant attention.
- **Benchmarking and evaluation.** ODL represents a real opportunity to gather valuable learning data **analytics** about a potentially wide body of students – from different backgrounds, different ages, different cultures, etc. The supporting learning environments and delivery mechanism, augmented by specific features such as e-portfolios, naturally gather vast amounts of data about learning habits, paths, etc. These come for free, but one of the goals of the Education quadrant should be to design rich, engaging and interactive online pedagogies capable of gathering specific context-based and individualised analytics. ODL can be a rich base for future research into educational needs and patterns.

Partnering

OPE is not about elearning. It takes much more than that to build a sustainable distance offering. The key benefit of OPE is that it helps a college to understand what has to be done in total, if it wants to successfully develop a business in ODL.

OPE begins to highlight the overall set of capabilities that need to be called on. Large colleges may have most of these in-house, but may find it difficult to coordinate and rely on these over time. The likelihood of needing to partner to achieve the goals of being able to build a sustainable business should be considered. This arrangement should be flexible, and able to change over time, with the college able to make a continued judgement about whether to reclaim control of some or all of any initial partner-managed processes. It may decide to leave some permanently under the control of the partner if that is the best option to ensure continuing success.

OPE allows a college to match all of the processes that have been recognised as needed with the necessary capability, and enables it to attach and control the costs associated with this.

Summary

The OPE diagram is extremely valuable if it truly represents all the issues about to be faced in developing a global business in education – particularly one that may represent a departure from the norm, e.g. developing and supporting online distance learning.

A college can gain from drawing up its own version of a OPE diagram before it embarks on such a development, but it should do it fully confident that it is a truly holistic representation of the requirements ahead.

It will save significant time, effort and cost and help to eliminate the unexpected.