

Title

A risk management approach to quality assurance in an omnichannel higher education context.

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Abstract

The increasing financial challenges in the UK higher education sector necessitate strategic responses to ensure long-term sustainability. One emerging approach is the adoption of an omnichannel delivery model, integrating online and in-person learning to enhance accessibility and student engagement. This paper explores the application of a risk management framework to quality assurance within an omnichannel higher education context. Specifically, it examines whether risk management can support innovation while maintaining educational standards. Using an action research methodology, the study evaluates a UK business school's implementation of risk-based quality assurance across two case studies: a new physical campus location and a franchise-based online partnership. Findings will inform institutional strategies for mitigating risks associated with omnichannel education while aligning with accreditation standards. This research contributes to the growing discourse on risk management's role in fostering innovation and ensuring quality in higher education, with implications for institutions navigating digital and structural transitions.

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Introduction, background and context

The context for higher education in the UK is increasingly challenging. According to a report by (PwC, 2024), in 2024, 40% of institutions were reporting a financial deficit. Fee income from both domestic and international students are forecasted to fall in the medium to long term. Some of the changes may be structural rather than temporary. The authors of the report suggest that these challenges may have longer term and strategic impacts.

“Despite its strong international brand and academic excellence, the UK Higher Education sector and its institutions are facing significant financial challenges that threaten to impact the quality of provision and student outcomes. In the longer term, this may impact the UK's international standing and its ability to attract and retain students, and therefore undermine the considerable economic benefits the sector brings to the UK.” (PwC, 2024).

Some HEIs are responding to this strategic context by adjusting their own strategic response. Aston University has developed its 2030 strategy to position itself for long term sustainability. Part of this strategy is to develop an omni-channel delivery model.

What is omni-channel?

Omni-channel education has been defined as:

“a seamless integration of online and classroom learning, empowering and allowing students to choose the mode that aligns with their preferences, lifestyle, and learning style.” (Kirschner, 2024).

Omni-channel education intrinsically addresses the challenge of border crossing, where learners are moving between their organisational context and into a learning space. They may also be crossing geographical borders in their work and educational lives. Omni-channel recognises this reality and attempts to meet the student where they are to deliver learning in a student centric manner.

The relationship between risk management and innovation

In several sectors, authors are suggesting that risk management may support innovation. For example, risk management may improve innovation in large corporations (Juul Andersen, 2009) and (Berglund, 2007). Others have investigated risk and innovation in public services (Brown and Osborne, 2013), the supply chain context (Kwak et al., 2018) and technology management (Genus and Coles, 2006).

There is increasing interest and research into the role of risk management in quality assurance in higher education across the world, for example in Australia (Edwards, 2012), in England and the US (Yokoyama, 2018), in Poland (Maciejczak, 2016) and in a conflict zone (Jesry et al., 2022)

The role of accrediting bodies

Accrediting bodies provide a set of standards which if achieved provide prospective students with a high level of confidence about the quality of education they will receive (AACSB, 2025, AMBA, 2025, EQUIS, 2025). Accrediting bodies all in their own way encourage innovation whilst at the same time setting standards. A good example of this is the opening sentence in the AACSB Standards:

“Our member network, known as the AACSB Business Education Alliance, is a network of business educators, businesses, and non-profit and public-sector organizations dedicated to sharing knowledge and best practices that accelerate innovation in business education.” (AACSB, 2025).

Research question

An important research question then is:

“Can a risk management approach deliver quality assurance whilst also allowing innovation in an omni-channel higher education context?”

Action research

The focus of this research is a real-world problem, since the Business School has received a recommendation from one of its accrediting bodies which directly addresses this issue. The recommendation is that the School must develop a systematic approach to quality assurance in the omni-channel context. The risk management approach has been developed and a cross functional team will be working on the implementation of this approach.

This research will apply action research to evaluating the application of the risk management approach to the launching of new channels and innovative programmes at a triple accredited UK Business School. Action research is a process of enquiry which involves both bringing about organisational change and at the same time researching practice. The research will follow the four stage process of constructing, planning action, taking action and evaluating action (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014).

Case study approach

For the action research, a case study method will be applied (Yin, 2003). Case studies of new channels will be selected. For each new channel, risk management will be applied to assess the risks to quality assurance which are presented by the new channel. The management of these risks will ensure that the new channels are delivering student outcomes. Two initial case studies have been chosen. The cases selected will explore two new contexts, namely a new location (London) and a new franchise online relationship. The rationale for selection of the initial cases is that they represent two key new channels and these channels are representative of a wider set of potential cases.

This project will be launched as a multi-disciplinary cross functional activity. The learning from the project will form the basis of the research. The success of the risk management approach will ultimately be determined by whether the accrediting body accepts the action plan proposed.

Development steps

Since the paper was submitted in February there have been some developments. In June a risk management workshop was held with key stakeholders in the University including education, quality and professional services. The workshop was facilitated by the Head of Risk and Assurance at the University. The workshop identified the following high-level risks with associated drivers:

- Staff awareness and engagement
- Delivery partner set-up
- Quality and Performance Management of Delivery Partners
- High Quality Student Experience Across Channels
- Transition to Successful Omni-Channel Delivery
- Quality and Performance Management of Internal (Aston) Provision

This workshop is the first step in the risk management process, but it was a very useful exchange between the key stakeholders in this situation.

The second key development is the Aston London location going 'live' in July 2025.

By the time of the conference, the project will have been live for six months. It will be possible to report on the success or otherwise of the risk management approach. The learnings from the case studies and the lessons learned can be evaluated.

Risk mitigation strategies implemented during the pilot phase will be analysed to determine their impact on operational efficiency and educational delivery. Adjustments and refinements to the risk management model will be proposed based on these findings. The outcomes of this study will contribute to developing best practices for integrating risk-based quality assurance in omnichannel higher education context and guiding future institutional strategies.

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