

Critical Success Factors for Taking Programmes Online

Key takeaways

We spoke with Dr David Walker, Head of Technology Enhanced Learning at the University of Sussex, about the university's new online postgraduate courses, developed in partnership with Pearson Higher Education. We asked David to share his thoughts on how some of the critical success factors for online courses have been approached within these courses.

1. Work with the tools you have

Q: The institution invests a lot of money in technology, so it is worth getting the most of out it to maximise value and return on investment. How do the Sussex online courses make most use of their institutional technology?

David: "Canvas is the online study platform that underpins Sussex's on-campus and online course provision. Canvas itself is rich in native tools to support communication, collaboration and assessment but also represents the centre of an integrated ecosystem of digital technologies which further enrich the learning experience, such as Turnitin for originality checking and Talis Aspire for the provision of digital reading lists. This connected environment creates a seamless learning experience for staff and students and avoids the need for users to manage multiple logins."

2. Provide a consistent student experience

Q: Being consistent in how you present information and talk about learning experiences helps students navigate the learning environment and engage with activities efficiently and effectively. How have the Sussex courses been designed to support a consistent student experience?

David: "All Sussex's online courses have a distinctive identity and course design which is consistently applied across modules to create an intuitive user journey. Assignment briefs are foregrounded to ensure task requirements and criteria are clear in advance. Content is chunked in a week-by-week format and structured based on a learning design crafted with the academic team. Our International Marketing MSc (online) course, for example, follows a Focus – Explore – Apply approach which progressively deepens student learning and provides rich insights into how the key concepts introduced can be implemented in practice."



3. Context (not content) is king

Q: Within on-campus teaching, context around learning is given constantly, often without much thought by academics - it is instinctive. How have Sussex's online courses been created with contextual information which supports effective teaching and learning?

David: "The consistent structure and underpinning learning design implemented across Sussex's online courses ensures that unnecessary cognitive load is minimised and key information is easily located. Contextual information is largely constrained to the module Syllabus while the Assignment Brief area represents a contained location for assignment instruction, criteria and guidance. Throughout each module the weekly content provides indicative study time enabling students to plan their studies, setting out transparently the level of work required."



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4. Be present

Q: Presence in the online environment is critical to student engagement and progression. How do Sussex online tutors support presence and engagement in these courses?

David: "Presence and connectivity in our online courses is woven throughout the fabric of the learning design. Introductory videos, video assignment briefs, weekly scheduled announcements and involvement in weekly expert insights videos ensure our tutors are present virtually, if not physically, throughout our modules. Asynchronous or pre-recorded contributions are augmented by a defined number of synchronous sessions allowing students to connect with tutors in real time. Each module also figures team tasks and peer assignments connecting students with each other, building a thriving online community. Our goal is to facilitate online learning not abandoned learning. Each module therefore outlines how tutors can be contacted, sets clear expectations around required engagement on the part of students and how further support can be accessed when required."

5. Think "accessibility first"

Q: Designing online courses to be accessible to all is a fundamental principle of open and equitable education. How do the Sussex online courses support global access?

David: "All of Sussex's online course content and materials is designed to adhere to WCAG AA standard as a minimum and AAA where possible. Our approach to accessibility recognises that all students benefit from accessible design. All video content includes closed captions - utilising the in-built captioning capability of Canvas's Arc video management tool -and are accompanied by transcripts. A considered approach is taken to the use of images to ensure that their incorporation is relevant and adds value and that accompanying alt text provides meaningful description for those using screen readers. Our quality review process tests not only functional accessibility but seeks to design out unnecessary jargon or colloquialisms recognising for many of our online students English will not be their first language."

Critical success factors checklist

Use the checklist below to quickly assess your institution, department or course readiness for taking courses online.

1. I/we are competent and confident utilising our institutional learning technology tools.
2. I/we understand how to provide a consistent learning experience in online courses.
3. I/we understand how to structure content with contextual relevance.
4. I/we are confident that we can provide a strong sense of presence and engagement in online courses.
5. I/we are familiar with WCAG standards and are confident that we can produce content and courses that are fully accessible.

For more information about our course design and consultancy services please contact Jo.Corwood@pearson.com