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Critical Success Factors and Barriers in E-Learning Implementation

A Research Proposal for Higher Education Digital Transformation

Tobias Zeier • University of Essex Online • January 2026

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Research Problem

Critical Success Factors and Barriers in E-Learning Implementation in UK Higher Education Institutions: A Multiple Case Study Investigation

- Higher education institutions investing substantial resources in e-learning without systematic understanding of implementation success conditions (Okoye *et al.*, 2023).
- COVID-19 accelerated digital transformation, revealing critical infrastructure gaps and pedagogical preparation deficits across Russell Group, post-1992, specialist and distance learning providers (Turnbull, Chugh and Luck, 2021).
- Effectiveness depends on complex interactions between technological systems, instructional design, institutional support and learner characteristics (Yodihartomo, Aurelia H. and Wijaya, 2022).
- UK institutions require evidence-based guidance to optimise investments, enhance learner engagement and design resilient, equitable digital learning ecosystems (Achtypi *et al.*, 2025).

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Significance and Contribution to the Discipline

Academic Contribution
Synthesises fragmented literature across technology, pedagogy and equity into coherent framework, advancing understanding of implementation complexity across diverse institutional types (Amrane-Cooper *et al.*, 2023).

Professional Contribution
Supplies actionable strategic guidance addressing sector-wide challenges and identified gaps in equity-focused empirical research (Singh, Singh and Mishra, 2024).

UK-Specific Gap Addressed
First comparative investigation of infrastructure-pedagogy interaction across UK institution types (Russell Group, post-1992, specialist, distance learning).

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Research Question and Aims

Primary Research Question

How can UK higher education institutions effectively operationalise critical success factors whilst systematically mitigating implementation barriers?

Key Area

- Develop integrated framework of success factors across technological, pedagogical and institutional dimensions.
- Identify institution-specific barriers and develop context-sensitive mitigation strategies.
- Produce evidence-based strategic guidance for UK higher education sector.

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Research Objectives: Prioritised Focus

Objective 1: Success Factor Synthesis
Synthesise success factors across technological, pedagogical and institutional dimensions, with primary focus on infrastructure quality and instructor competence as foundational enablers.

Objective 2: Case Study Investigation
Conduct qualitative investigation across four UK institutions (Russell Group, post-1992, specialist, distance learning) identifying institution-specific barriers and comparative implementation approaches.

Objective 3: Framework Development
Develop implementation framework with resource allocation guidance enabling institutions to prioritise investment decisions.

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Key Literature and Theoretical Framework

Seven Critical Success Factors identified across literature: System quality, infrastructure, learner characteristics, instructor competence, institutional support, pedagogical design and social capital (Yodihartomo, Aurelia H. and Wijaya, 2022).

Primary Focus Factors (Foundational):

- **Infrastructure and System Quality:** Accounts for 69.4% variance in user satisfaction (Astuti and Yusdita, 2024).
- **Instructor Competence:** Innovativeness predicts 70.2% higher adoption likelihood (Purwandari *et al.*, 2024).

Barriers:

- **Technological** - connectivity, devices (Turnbull, Chugh and Luck, 2021)
- **Pedagogical** - preparation gaps, professional development deficits (Mulaudzi, 2024)
- **Social** - isolation, competence gaps, equity concerns (Achtypi, Isiaka, Schildt and Arico, 2025)
- **Institutional** - capacity, resource constraints (Okur et al., 2025)

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Research Methodology and Design

Case Selection Strategy: Four UK institutions selected purposively by type (Russell Group, post-1992 university, specialist institution, distance learning provider) to enable comparison of primary factors (infrastructure, instructor competence) across institutional contexts.

- **Data Collection:** 32 semi-structured interviews (8 per institution with leaders, IT directors, academic staff); 6 focus groups (48 students, purposively sampled to include students with learning differences and from disadvantaged backgrounds); institutional policy document analysis.
- **Focus:** Emphasis on infrastructure investment decisions and pedagogical professional development strategies.

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Research Methodology and Data Analysis Strategy

Design and Data Collection: Qualitative multiple case study across four UK institutions. 32 semi-structured interviews (8 per institution); six focus groups (48 students); institutional policy document analysis.

Analytical Approach (NVivo):

- **Interview Data:** Deductive coding of primary factors (infrastructure, instructor competence) plus inductive identification of emerging themes, organised by institution type and participant role.
- **Focus Groups:** Coding for equity perspectives and accessibility barriers, with separate analysis for students with learning differences.
- **Document Analysis:** Policy documents coded for resource allocation priorities and infrastructure investment ratios.
- **Cross-Case Comparison:** Matrix analysis comparing theme prevalence and barrier severity across institution types (Russell Group, post-1992, specialist, distance learning).

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Ethical Considerations and Approval

- **Ethics Approval:** Full University of Essex ethics committee approval obtained prior to data collection.
- **Informed Consent:** Written informed consent from all participants with clear information about data usage and confidentiality.
- **Data Protection:** Compliance with GDPR regulations through anonymisation, secure storage and restricted access protocols.
- **Vulnerable Populations:** Enhanced safeguards for students with learning differences and marginalised groups.
- **Institutional Confidentiality:** Case institutions anonymised in publications; consent required for identifiable data use.

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Research Artefacts and Outputs

Primary Artefacts

- **Integrated Implementation Framework:** Visual model synthesising success factors and barrier mitigation strategies across dimensional analysis.
- **Institutional Case Study Profiles:** Contextualised descriptions of implementation approaches, barriers encountered and institutional responses.
- **Strategic Implementation Guidance:** Actionable recommendations for institutions at different maturity levels, with resource allocation frameworks.
- **Academic Manuscript:** Peer-reviewed journal article (target: British Journal of Educational Technology).

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Project Timeline: 12-Month Schedule

Phase 1 (Months 1-2)	Literature synthesis, framework refinement, ethics submission
Phase 2 (Months 3-4)	Ethics approval, participant recruitment, interview protocol finalisation
Phase 3 (Months 5-8)	Data collection (interviews, focus groups, document analysis)
Phase 4 (Months 9-10)	Data analysis, case study synthesis, framework validation
Phase 5 (Months 11-12)	Manuscript preparation, dissemination strategy, institutional feedback

Table 1: 5 Phase Project Timeline (Zeier, 2026)

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Risk Assessment and Mitigation

Participant Recruitment Risk

Mitigation: Early engagement with institution leaders, incentive structures for focus group participation

Data Quality Risk

Mitigation: Pilot testing of interview protocols, experienced researcher facilitating focus groups

Institutional Change Risk

Mitigation: Longitudinal tracking, regular check-ins with institutional contacts

Timeline Pressure Risk

Mitigation: Parallel work streams, contingency time allocation in schedule

Research Contributions

Academic Contributions: Integrates fragmented literature into coherent framework; advances understanding through comparative institutional analysis revealing context-sensitive implementation factors.

Professional Contributions: Supplies evidence-based strategic guidance addressing sector-wide challenges; provides institution-type-specific implementation frameworks with resource allocation guidance (Amrane-Cooper *et al.*, 2023).

UK-Specific Contribution: First comparative investigation of infrastructure and pedagogical development interaction across UK institution types.

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Summary

This research proposal addresses the urgent need for evidence-based guidance on effective e-learning implementation in UK higher education institutions through systematic investigation of critical success factors and contextual barriers.

The resulting integrated framework will enable institutions to optimise investments, enhance learner outcomes and design resilient, equitable digital learning ecosystems.

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