INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

IfG case study:
Oak National Academy

Raj Johal and Nick Davies

Introduction

Covid-19 has presented huge difficulties for the delivery of public services. From criminal courts to general practice, the pandemic and lockdowns have necessitated new ways of working. The disruption was particularly severe in schools, which had to close their doors to all but a handful of children. But the need to adapt to a much changed and changing environment also gave rise to opportunities.

This case study looks at the Oak National Academy as an example of innovation during the pandemic. Launched in April 2020 as an online resource for teachers during the initial school closure, Oak has since developed 44,000 products with the support of 550 teachers, including videos, transcripts, worksheets and quizzes, and delivered over 147 million lessons in its online classroom.[*,1] We explore Oak's genesis and roll-out, highlighting key success factors and making recommendations for Oak's recently announced future as an arm's length body (ALB).

Background

Recent government thinking on showcasing and sharing high-quality teaching materials can be traced to the 2016 education white paper.[2] This set an ambition to support continuing professional development for teachers through, among other things, incentivising schools to share their research and products, so "that teachers have greater access to high quality teaching materials to improve workload and effectiveness". When on 18 March 2020 the government announced the closure of schools, colleges and early years settings in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, this concept remerged.

---

[*]   Correct as of 10 May 2022.

Matt Hood, a founder of the Ambition Institute, a national education charity, developed a briefing for an online classroom, following discussions with David Thomas, headteacher at Jane Austen College. He shared this with Tom Shinner, a former director of strategy at the Department for Education (DfE), and Chris Paterson, deputy director at DfE. Within a few days they discussed whether it could be one of the measures used to fill the void created by the absence of face-to-face teaching. After further discussion with Rory Gribbell, a special adviser to the then schools minister Nick Gibb, they put the proposal informally to the secretary of state for education, Gavin Williamson.

In parallel, a newly forming Oak team were already having discussions with schools, leading multi-academy trusts (MATs) and other interested parties. DfE supported Oak's plan to develop the curriculum and deliver its content in collaboration with partners. Central to this was a group of Teach First alumni* who, though not all personally acquainted, shared a common mindset.

The government focused its efforts on funding, playing a facilitative role – with the secretary of state giving the project momentum by agreeing that officials and advisers could support the Oak team's work. Oak got key MATs on board to support content development, with Rachael de Souza, chief executive of the Inspiration Trust, supporting Matt Hood to co-ordinate them; and they secured the services of furloughed colleagues from a range of education charities, platform hosts and a branding agency in a matter of days. They rapidly created content to deliver a 'minimum viable product',** with eight days to create the first week's lessons, build the platform, launch the academy and raise awareness.

Oak's initial governance structure was largely driven by convenience. With a need for pace, it was 'incubated' within the Reach Foundation, an education charity, using its back-office functions such as HR and finance, rather than setting new ones up from scratch. Funding came through a blend of DfE grants and philanthropic support from the Mohn Westlake Foundation – a charitable foundation set up in 2016 to improve the lives of young people – with Oak's costs over its first year broadly comparable with an average secondary school. Table 1 summarises Oak's funding in 2020/21.

Table 1 **Oak National Academy financial review of audited grants**[3]

	1/4/20 – 10/7/20	**11/7/20 – 31/3/21**	**Total**
DfE	£498,000	£3,202,000	£3,700,000
Mohn Westlake Foundation Donations	£5,000	£1,068,000	£1,073,000
Total	£503,000	£4,270,000	£4,773,000

* Rory Gribbell, Matt Hood, David Thomas, John Roberts, Oak's director of product engineering and Jonathan Dando, Oak's director of school support.
** An early, basic version of a product that meets the minimum necessary requirements for use but can be adapted and improved in the future, especially after feedback.

Launch and first term

Oak was formally launched by Gavin Williamson on 20 April 2020 on the Number 10 podium. Later called 'Oak 1.0' internally, it initially provided 180 different lessons a week, geared to the core subjects. Viewing itself as part tech start-up, part educational institution, Oak's approach was 'agile', with 'product squads' delivering essential resources quickly and taking feedback to iterate the content and user interface in two-week cycles. Examples of this include removing references to year groups at the start of video content so it could be used for pupils of all ages and changing the colours of some resources so they were more legible when printed in black and white. There was focus on the user experience with, for example, no cumbersome logins and a familiar user interface that felt like a virtual school, with sections broken down by subject and key stage.

Data on usage for Oak was positive. After two weeks, lessons had been accessed two million times.[4] By the end of Oak 1.0 in August 2020[5] this had jumped to 20 million, with an average of 220,000 users every day.[*]

There were some difficulties given the fast roll-out. For example,[**] Oak initially overlooked the requirement for a licence to enable it to use copyrighted material. More importantly, the feedback on content was not universally positive. Some important content was, by Oak's own admission,[6] absent, including for art, music, drama, sport and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND);[7] and one Institute for Government (IfG) interviewee who was a content user felt Oak's overall 'offer' suffered from a lack of coherence due to the 'build as you go' approach.[8] Another interviewee said that the quality of some lessons was poor.[9] Oak's position was that it recognised the needs of children were varied, but it was not designed to provide a full school experience, and some learning resources, such as sensory tools, could not be delivered remotely.[10]

Second phase

During Oak's first term, DfE and Oak's leadership took the decision to keep it open at the end of the school year as a contingency if the pandemic necessitated further school closures. This was in stark contrast to other decisions made about education over this period, with previous IfG research[11] finding that both DfE and No.10 were reluctant to plan for further closures for fear this would make them more likely. It is possible Oak was easier to maintain as a contingency as it was independent of government and already running.

Oak used this opportunity to develop its offer and organisation into something more stable and sustainable, known internally as Oak 2.0.

---

[*]   Average daily unique users excluding half-term week and weekends, based on Google Analytics.
[**]   Although SEND content was added from the second week.

During the summer of 2020, the Oak team, with the support of partners including subject associations:

- created 11,000 lessons, including 600 lessons for pupils in the specialist sector

- set up a dedicated teacher hub with more downloadable content

- improved the user experience with, for example, better readability, layout and navigability of curriculum maps that provided an overview of lessons by subject and key stage

- created videos of teachers deconstructing their own lessons for trainee teachers

- worked with internet service providers to 'zero rate' its site.

This was achieved by reaching agreement with existing partners to remain on board for the second phase, careful calculation of the number of teachers needed to deliver the additional work and securing further support from teachers, topped up through partner or other networks, to develop it. There was, too, an advisory group to help iterate plans and content.

Over this period, Oak received increased funding and oversight from DfE, reduced reliance on volunteers and instead recruited a core paid staff of around 30, who developed the new offer, working with over 500 teachers to create the lessons. With increased governance, Oak inevitably lost some agility but did make demonstrable progress in meeting the varied needs of children, by offering more SEND content, for example, although some gaps remained. And its expansion was timely: the second wave of school closures in January 2021 after one day of term proved to be the busiest period for the academy.

A survey of teachers during this second phase[12] found that they were satisfied with Oak and that it helped improve their workload and wellbeing. This can in part be attributed to Oak's role in supporting them through the January 2021 school closures. A separate evaluation[13] found teacher downloads declined less slowly than pupil usage after school re-openings, indicating continued use, and teachers and pupils in poorer areas used Oak's resources more.[*]

The analysis also found that the socioeconomic status of the pupils had an impact on the effectiveness of the resources.[14] Generally, pupils from lower socioeconomic classes engaged less well with the material, despite their higher usage. One of the possible reasons for this was that pupils from more well-off families had better access to laptops and tablets, which were better for concentration than the phones that were more likely to be used by children from less well-off families. Further, poorer pupils using computers registered lower session lengths than children from wealthier backgrounds using computers, indicating reduced impact.

---

[*]   For further data on Oak's usage see Hannay, T, 'What Oak National Academy usage tells us about education during the pandemic', SchoolDash, 5 November 2021, www.schooldash.com/blog-2111.html#20211105

Figure 1 **Oak National Academy usage, January to May 2021**[15]
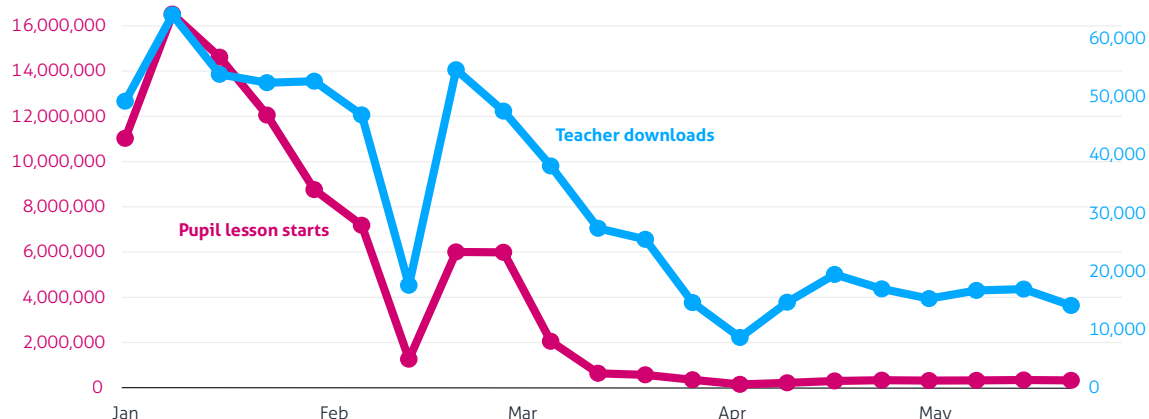
Source: Institute for Government adaptation of SchoolDash analysis of Oak National Academy data

Success factors

Oak stands out as a positive example of rapid innovation in the delivery of public services. Its success can be attributed to five key factors.

1. Government trusted the experts to innovate and lead

The secretary of state at the time, Gavin Williamson, provided swift support and then focused his and his department's efforts on providing a framework for Oak to operate in: funding, good governance and quality assurance. He allowed those with the subject matter expertise – Oak's leadership, in collaboration with schools and key partners – to develop the materials and lead delivery. This reduced red tape, increased pace and delivered good-quality content.

Trust and delegation in the interest of pragmatism were key to success. This was likely enabled by the strength of existing relationships between the Oak team and DfE and Oak's low cost, both of which are discussed in more detail below.

2. Existing relationships gave the proposal credibility and expedited development

Education policy making is a relatively small world. Once the idea for Oak emerged, it benefitted from rapid development and support from a tight group of likeminded and influential people, many of whom were Teach First alumni. Without this existing network of key officials, special advisers and leaders of MATS, it is unlikely that the idea – in its current iteration, and during the pandemic – would have generated sufficient momentum, secured ministerial support and been rolled out so quickly.

3. Cross-sector collaboration cut through partisan perspectives

Oak is in part a story of teachers, volunteers and other education professionals – including high-profile figures such as the Archbishop of Canterbury – coming together with government to do good in a crisis. Oak successfully harnessed the enthusiasm of this coalition of the willing, while also bringing on board trade unions, tech firms,

teachers, curriculum experts and publishers, with the urgency of the moment overriding the normal barriers to this type of collaboration.

By bringing together partners and interested groups around a common altruistic purpose, Oak avoided many of the divergences of opinion that are often a feature of traditional policy development and delivery.

4. Oak prioritised and was highly responsive to users and their feedback

Oak focused on delivering the minimum viable product and then refining it based on user feedback. This meant, on occasion, sacrificing quality and breadth to meet deadlines. But in doing so Oak was able to target its efforts on the parts of the curriculum that it felt would be of use to the maximum number of students. At a time when the alternative was children receiving no lessons at all, government was willing to accept pace over perfection.

Oak was then responsive to feedback, meaning users could see quick, demonstrable improvements in the service, helping to engage them in the development of the solution.

5. Oak's initial costs were low

The difficulty of securing funding can stymie public service innovations. Oak's staffing model and the willingness of many people to volunteer their time and services meant that little money was required to get the project off the ground. The government's initial grant of £0.5m was a very modest outlay for a proposal that promised strong benefits. And once Oak developed a user base in version 1.0, the government's investment in 2.0 – including as a contingency for Covid-19 – represented good financial sense, particularly in the context of the estimated £4.3bn government spend on education in response to the pandemic.[*,16]

The future: risks and recommendations

On 11 March 2022, Gavin Williamson's successor as education secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, announced Oak would become a non-departmental public body (NDPB) to "support teachers in delivering excellent curriculum content as part of world-class lessons". Recognising Oak's achievements,[17] he said its conversion would support the government's ambition to 'level up' standards across the school system. However, in May, the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA) threatened legal action against the government for exclusion from the consultation about the changes, breaches of UK and EU subsidy rules and the government's failure to consider the market impact of the changes.[18]

The government will need to navigate this obstacle, but the litigation – which largely relates to process failure – does not necessarily undermine the case for the formation of an NDPB. Much depends on how the government's objective of "supporting teachers in delivering excellent curriculum content" is achieved: harmonising curricula, identifying and promoting best practice or providing tools and resources, or any combination of

---

[*]   Across the years 2020/21 and 2021/22.

these. And the extent to which the NDPB will be required to continue to fulfil its original role of contingency provision.

Notwithstanding this, the government's proposal has benefits, including ensuring that Oak's tools, user base, intellectual property and corporate memory are not wasted, and providing certainty to Oak's staff and users.

This reform builds on wider changes to the school system since 2010. The coalition's focus on increasing school autonomy has been supplanted, since the 2016 education white paper, by the 2022 white paper and a greater recognition that the government can use its convening power to support the improvement of a largely autonomous system. Oak can, subject to the government's decision on its remit, play a role in this by codifying the best practice of schools, freeing up teachers to deliver high-quality lessons rather than develop every bit of content.

These changes do, however, bring risks. First, Oak's success in the early days of the pandemic, in particular, was largely attributable to its agility. It had a 'start-up' feel, with relatively high risk tolerance, no detailed long-term plan and a 'flat' structure. If the government wishes to retain something akin to this then close alignment to central government and more bureaucracy risks stifling that.

Second, there are legitimate questions around the appropriateness of government taking on a more active role in curriculum design. To date, Oak has navigated competing interests in the education sector, but this will be harder if the new NDPB is seen as an agent of government taking on responsibility for roles currently led by schools and the private sector. And, as evidenced by the threatened litigation, providers remain concerned about Oak's impact on competition. Oak relied on key partners to achieve its success and it is critical that the new body retains this collaborative approach if it is to be sustainable and produce high-quality resources.

Third, as mentioned above, Oak's remit and relationship to government are yet to be finalised. Government has so far only said that the NDPB's resources will be entirely optional for schools;[19] but the lack of further detail risks creating confusion among Oak's current users.

To ensure these risks are well managed and to support Oak's future success, the IfG makes the following recommendations:

1. The purpose of the NDPB and its relationship with government should be clear

There are a number of forms that the new NDPB could take, with different implications for the autonomy of the new body. Similarly, to date, the government has been vague about the precise remit of the NDPB. In line with the government's own guidance to "determine early which kind of body is most appropriate when setting up a new ALB",[20] the government must urgently provide clarity over the form and functions of Oak's replacement.

2. The NDPB should remain operationally independent from government

Fundamental to Oak's success was the ability to take swift decisions in response to a fast-changing environment, while drawing on expertise within its network to develop tools and resources. To retain Oak's nimbleness and its culture of innovation for the benefit of both its staff and users, it must remain operationally independent of government. This is also essential for its credibility with the wider teaching profession. Whitehall should set the measures of success and budgetary parameters and support the NDPB to focus on delivery.

3. The NDPB should have robust plans for future school shutdowns

While development of excellent curriculum content is important and the ambition to support levelling up admirable, the government should not lose sight of Oak's original mission: to ensure that children can access lessons from home. Continuity of education, be it in response to mass school closures or individual absences, should be a primary objective of the new NDPB.

4. The NDPB should continue to seek input from experts in curriculum development

Expertise for education sits in the system, with both teachers and other curriculum and subject matter experts. The future NDPB should develop in-house capabilities so it can act as a credible system leader, but must bring in – and continue to seek input from – the best minds on both specific subjects and broader curriculum coherence. The role of subject matter experts in schools, subject associations and beyond is critical to development of high-quality content.

5. There should be proper evaluation and assurance of the NDPB's performance

Oak has had limited formal evaluation. This was understandable given the circumstances around its provenance and the difficulty in measuring impact while schools were closed. But the NDPB 's performance should be assessed more robustly given its permanence, broader remit and closer alignment to government. This should include: macro assessments on the quality of curricula and contingency arrangements for education; micro-level evaluations, with OFSTED, of the NDPB's individual tools, resources, lessons and syllabus; and robust quality assurance processes.[*]

---

[*] The NDPB will likely be subject to a review approximately every five years to ensure it is still fulfilling its original objectives: www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-bodies-review-programme

References

1   Figures shared by Oak Academy.

2   Department for Education, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, Cm 9230, The Stationery Office, 2016, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508447/Educational_Excellence_Everywhere.pdf

3   Oak National Academy Annual Report September 2020 – July 2021, https://assets.ctfassets.net/ygggx3rcdvia/52j7koxaqhxdc08gHMoKlZ/d24d65ba96bf5fbf0a7c1d90f186a30c/ONA_Annual_Report_2021_v3.pdf

4   Smart, Y, 'Oak National Academy: A user experience', Premier Advisory, 10 May 2020, https://premieradvisory.co.uk/oak-national-academy

5   Hood, M, 'What Oak Academy has done well, and how it can do better', Schools Week, 10 August 2020, https://schoolsweek.co.uk/what-oak-academy-has-done-well-and-how-it-can-do-better

6   Thomas, D, 'What's wrong with Oak National Academy?', The National Academy, 28 May 2020, www.thenational.academy/blog/whats-wrong-with-oak-national-academy

7   Tirraoro, T, 'What's wrong with Oak Academy's specialist curriculum?', Special Needs Jungle, 4 May 2020, www.specialneedsjungle.com/whats-wrong-oak-academy-specialist-curriculum

8   IfG interview.

9   IfG interview.

10   Hannay, T, 'What Oak National Academy usage tells us about education during the pandemic', SchoolDash, 5 November 2021, www.schooldash.com/blog-2111.html#20211105

11   Timmins, N, *Schools and Coronavirus: The government's handling of education during the pandemic*, Institute for Government, 2021.

12   Lough, C, 'Online lessons: 6 findings from Oak National Academy', *Tes Magazine*, 6 September 2021, www.tes.com/magazine/teaching-learning/general/online-lessons-6-findings-oak-national-academy

13   Hannay, T, 'What Oak National Academy usage tells us about education during the pandemic', SchoolDash, 5 November 2021, www.schooldash.com/blog-2111.html#20211105

14   Lough, C, 'Covid: How remote learning changed during pandemic', *Tes Magazine*, 5 November 2021, www.tes.com/magazine/teaching-learning/general/covid-how-remote-learning-changed-during-pandemic

15   *Ibid.*

16   Farquharson, C, Sibieta, L, Waltmann, B, 'COVID-related spending on education in England', Institute for Fiscal Studies, 20 May 2021, https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15439

17   Department for Education, 'Education Secretary promises to harness "energy and expertise" of teachers', press release, 11 March 2022, www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-promises-to-harness-energy-and-expertise-of-teachers

18   Belger, T, 'BESA threatens legal action over "unlawful" DfE plans for Oak', Schools Week, 16 May 2022, https://schoolsweek.co.uk/oak-national-academy-besa-legal-action-unlawful-claim

19   www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-addresses-association-of-school-and-college-leaders-conference

20   Cabinet Office and Efficiency and Reform Group, 'The approvals process for the creation of new arm's-length bodies', guidance, 14 December 2012, www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-approvals-process-for-the-creation-of-new-arms-length-bodies

The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective.

We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government.

We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking, to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.