

Alternative provision: The surge in demand and the role of remote online learning in creating capacity

Item Type	Article
Authors	Smith, Sharon
Citation	Smith, S. (2025). Alternative provision: The surge in demand and the role of remote online learning in creating capacity. Quality Education for All, 2(2), 19-40. https://doi.org/10.1108/QEA-09-2024-0097
DOI	10.1108/QEA-09-2024-0097
Publisher	Emerald
Journal	Quality Education for All
Rights	Licence for VoR version of this article starting on 2025-07-15: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Download date	2026-05-21 17:06:36
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/629643

Alternative provision: the surge in demand and the role of remote online learning in creating capacity

Sharon Smith

Faculty of Education, University of Chester, Chester, UK

Quality Education
for All

19

Received 15 September 2024
Revised 5 January 2025
28 February 2025
23 March 2025
3 April 2025
Accepted 4 April 2025

Abstract

Purpose – The surge in demand for alternative provision (AP) necessitates that school leaders and educational practitioners overcome considerable challenges to secure high-quality, high-impact provision for a vulnerable and complex cohort of school-aged learners. The purpose of this study is to examine the national context based on secondary data analysis, before exploring the perspectives of leaders and practitioners on the use of remote online learning as a model for meeting demand.

Design/methodology/approach – Having examined the national data available, grass-roots perspectives were gleaned through an exploratory research model. Survey and focus group data was thematically analysed to distil perspectives on the uses and challenges of remote online learning to create capacity.

Findings – The findings of this study indicate considerable scope and potential for remote online learning as model for suitable and sustainable AP. However, there are challenges that mirror face-to-face provisions and should not be overlooked. Remote online learning does not offer a universal solution, but a viable option that can be deployed using professional judgement and an understanding of individual student needs.

Originality/value – This exploratory paper contributes secondary analysis of the national data available, offers insights on the reasons for the demand for AP and highlights the challenges faced by those working within the sector. This study offers practitioner perspectives from those pioneering the use of remote online learning in AP.

Keywords Alternative provision, AP, Remote learning, Online learning, Capacity, SEND, EHCP, Attendance, School leaders

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and background

This exploratory paper examines the ways remote online learning is being used to meet the surge in demand for alternative provision (AP). AP is recognised as an “umbrella term” (Clarke and Thompson, 2024, p. 2) that encompasses broad and varied forms of education outside of the mainstream schooling context. This type of provision is described as “complex” (Clarke and Thompson, 2024, p. 2), “wide ranging and disparate” (Trotman *et al.*, 2019, p. 220) and as being “scrutinised and contested” (Best, 2024, p. 1). Within this paper, the trends for AP demand at national level within the UK will be established through a secondary analysis of government produced data before exploring the perspectives of education leaders from varied settings; schools, local authorities and non-mainstream



© Sharon Smith. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

Quality Education for All
Vol. 2 No. 2, 2025
pp. 19-40
Emerald Publishing Limited
2976-9310
DOI 10.1108/QEA-09-2024-0097

settings from across the UK who are attempting to meet the surge in demand that they are facing.

Whilst there has been a greater focus on AP in recent years, there continues to be a clear need for further research in this field. By its very nature, AP embodies different and varied approaches to education that are other to that which is experienced in the mainstream and by the majority. Both the experiences of those students engaging in AP, often described as “marginalised,” (Best, 2024; Smith, 2021; Baroutsis *et al.*, 2016; te Riele, 2006) and the perspectives of those practitioners pioneering the use of evolving forms of AP have much to add to the dialogue surrounding these practices (Thomas and Loxley, 2022; Mills *et al.*, 2017).

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) as described within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to ensure access to inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes life-long learning for all. Some have explored addressing digital disparities in terms of bridging the digital divide and ensuring digital tools are available to all (Dastyari and Jose, 2024), which is indeed undisputed. Others have examined the way in which advancing technology enables evolving technological tools and pedagogical approaches (Lee and Choi, 2019; Kizilcec *et al.*, 2017; Shute and Rahimi, 2021). Within this paper, however, remote online education is explored as a medium through which high-quality AP of education can be attained and deployed when students are unable to access mainstream education and learning opportunities. Remote online learning is posited as one potential medium for providing effective learning to all, a key feature of SDG4 as identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2016):

RQ1. How are schools, local authorities and non-mainstream settings using remote online learning to create capacity for alternative education provision to meet the national surge in demand?

Aims:

- to identify the challenges school leaders and educational practitioners face in securing AP;
- to review how settings can identify high-quality, high-impact provisions, as informed by policy; and
- to examine whether remote online learning can provide a sustainable model for alternative education provision from the perspectives of school leaders and educational practitioners.

Alternative provision

AP is defined by the Department for Education in England as:

Alternative provision (AP) is for children of compulsory school age who do not attend mainstream or special schools and who would not otherwise receive suitable education, for any reason (Department for Education, 2018a, p. 5).

This documentation identifies the routes into AP as:

- behaviour which results in a permanent or fixed-period exclusion or an off-site direction by a school;
- health reasons – including physical or mental health needs; and
- where a child is awaiting placement in a mainstream school.

This definition was expanded upon later that year as:

Education for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed-term exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour (Department for Education, 2018b, p. 6).

These definitions cannot capture the complexities of how and why AP is required or the variability in the forms and quality of AP. Beyond the Department for Education definitions, others have aimed to further expand these definitions; drawing on various sources, Pennacchia and Thomson (2016, p. 67) described AP as “a diverse set of programmes which cater for young people who schools see as disengaging from mainstream education.” However, the issues surrounding how and why young people disengage remain opaque with gaps having been identified in how theoretical ideas, concepts and frameworks have been applied to research undertaken in this field. Johnston *et al.*'s (2024) meta-analysis of research undertaken in the AP sector demonstrated that the interpretation research is most often drawn from psychological or therapeutic framings rather than from “the marginality of social and political theoretical framings” (Johnston *et al.*, 2024, p. 12).

There are arguably as many causes for the surge in demand for AP, as there are numerous forms of AP itself. Theorists and policymakers point to the reproduction of social inequality through state education systems (Bartram, 2018); increased exclusion rates (Timpson, 2019); students encouraged to be off the roll or register of a school (off-rolling) to serve the interests of the school (Danechi, 2018); performativity cultures in mainstream settings (Done and Andrews, 2020); and challenges surrounding support for students with special educational needs (SEN Policy Research Forum, 2020) and parental choice (Enow and Kapcia, 2024).

To complicate matters further, whilst there may arguably be increasing recognition of AP as “an established feature of state education in England and the wider UK” (Trotman *et al.*, 2019, p. 219), there is a troubling lack of clarity in the way in which AP data is recorded. These diverse programmes can be split broadly into two categories; AP delivered in registered AP and regulated settings and AP that is delivered through unregistered and unregulated services or providers. The use of unregistered AP has long been a cause for concern within the Department for Education who state this “could pose risks, particularly when used for the most vulnerable children in AP” and that “Ofsted has raised concerns about insufficient oversight and quality assurance in this part of the system” (Department for Education, 2018a, p. 24).

However, the continuing rise in demand and the complexity of factors that contribute to that demand establishes that it is unfeasible for the current number of registered providers to meet demand. This distinction is pertinent because, most frequently, the remote online learning formats to be discussed in this paper have (until recently) been an unregistered source of provision.

In response to the increased use of online education and learning provisions in the UK, the 2019–2022 Johnson Conservative Government in the UK launched a new accreditation scheme for online education providers with the aim to “reassure children, parents and local authorities of the quality of education and safeguarding arrangements offered by these providers” (GOV.UK, 2023a). When this research was conducted, no settings had been accredited under this scheme. However, this may prove pertinent to the future of remote online learning, as there will be scope for its delivery to be sourced from an accredited provider, assuaging concerns surrounding unregulated and unregistered provisions.

Remote and online learning

Remote learning is a term commonly used in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, denoting the sudden and unexpected transition required to learning outside of traditional face-to-face

settings during lockdown periods across the globe (Ewing and Cooper, 2021; Steed *et al.*, 2022). Before the pandemic, models of distance learning, online learning and e-learning had been developed and deployed to meet a variety of needs. Researchers have considered the strengths and drawbacks, examining the rationale for the innovations at play, their economic benefits and their impacts on learners (Moore *et al.*, 2011; Okano *et al.*, 2023). It is not the intention to examine these often interchangeably used terms; it is necessary to define clearly the form of remote and online learning this study relates to.

This study reflects on a form of online remote education previously defined as “fully synchronous lessons utilising an interactive learning cloud platform to provide teacher led online learning” (Smith, 2021, p. 900). Students log into a mobile cloud learning platform to access lessons delivered by a professional teacher as commissioned by their school, local authority or non-mainstream setting to fill gaps in the students’ learning provision. Mobile Cloud Learning is described as “a blend of mobile learning and cloud computing which ensures convenient and interactive learning experience without limitations regarding location, time and accessibility” (Sultana, 2020, p. 223).

During the pandemic, not all students (or teachers) experienced remote education positively, yet there is a clear and growing evidence base for the positive impacts of remote online learning when implemented effectively outside of the context of an emergency response to a global crisis (Dişlen Dağgöl and İşpinar Akçayoğlu, 2023; Engelbrecht *et al.*, 2023; Fisher, 2021). There is agreement that evolved pedagogy, adapted instructional design, overcoming barriers and promoting active and interactive learning can be deployed to maximise impact and effectiveness which is evidenced through the triangulation of both student and practitioner perspectives. This paper further contributes to this evidence.

Scope of this study

The foundation of this study is the secondary analysis of longitudinal data available via the Department for Education in England pertaining to the prevalence of AP and the factors contributing towards the changes or shifts in demand that had been posited. Before exploring the practitioner perspectives via an exploratory method, this study examines the evidence for increasing numbers of students accessing AP and the implied causes and contributing factors implicit within this data.

Informed by this data analysis, the study then examined practitioner perspectives via research undertaken in collaboration with 17 varied educational settings nationwide. Within this sample, there were representatives from settings across nine unique English counties and regions. The participants also held numerous roles and responsibilities within their settings; some were teachers or school leaders, whilst others had roles more focused on inclusion or SEND and others had advisory capacities for local government bodies. Participants worked in varied educational settings that were all using remote online learning as AP for students who were unable to access mainstream education. The relevance of this information is twofold; it demonstrates that although based on a small sample of participants, broad and varied stakeholders engaged in the study. Additionally, there is considerable variability in the ways in which school by school and region by region AP is organised and delivered, just as there is variability in the provisions received (Trotman *et al.*, 2019; McCluskey *et al.*, 2015).

Additionally, as Johnston *et al.* (2024, p. 11) have previously suggested, whilst AP is not new, “the notion of an ‘AP sector’ is in its infancy, and networks, professional bodies, communities of practice, and a sector knowledge base are still in a state of development,” so the opportunity to facilitate practitioners discussing pertinent issues to the provisions they were using captured valuable knowledge within that sector.

The amalgamation of both the statistical data analysed and the presentation of the perspectives of participants commissioning remote online learning offers a comprehensive view of how schools, local authorities and non-mainstream settings are using remote online learning to create capacity for alternative education provision to meet demand.

Methods and data collection

Secondary data analysis for this paper was undertaken using data sourced from the Department for Education. The Department for Education is a ministerial body in England that works with various agencies and public bodies and is responsible for children's services and education. Data is collected by the Department for Education through school census and AP census returns. This data is made publicly available through the GOV.UK websites. The secondary analysis within this study pertains to three data sets: schools, pupils and their characteristics (GOV.UK, 2024a); education, health and care plans (EHCPs), (GOV.UK, 2024b) and suspensions and permanent exclusions in England (GOV.UK, 2024c). An EHCP is a legal document which sets out the plan for integrated education, health and social care support. An assessment of needs can be applied for where students are considered to require more support than is typically available in the mainstream classroom.

The analysis of this data involved the extraction of variables relating to the number of students in various AP settings, the proportion of students with EHCPs (used as an indicator of cohort complexity) and the rate of exclusion from education in England. Data was not consistently shared in comparable formats with reporting periods and measures presenting some complexities. However, descriptive and inferential analysis was applied to examine patterns and trends relating to the surge in demand for AP. Given the evolving nature of publicly available data, an initial analysis was undertaken before fieldwork commencing with participants but has since been revisited ahead of publication to ensure it continues to be timely and relevant.

Drawing on exploratory research models (Leavy, 2017; Smith, 2021), participants opted into two phases of the study. Participants were initially invited to respond to a short online survey before being invited to attend focus group discussions. The aim here was to document participants' lived experiences of using remote online learning.

The initial surveys enabled the collation of a preliminary data set that asked participants to detail their experiences of the demand for AP and its causes, which then further informed the focus groups questions which enabled more open and exploratory discussions in a semi-structured approach. This method allowed for questions to be posed to the group but follow-up questions and discussions to be built upon within the focus group to:

Elicit open responses by the participants that enable lines of conversation to be developed in situ in ways that could not have been anticipated when the interview schedule was being planned (Brown and Danaher, 2019, p. 7).

Discussion often flowed freely with participants building on each other's responses and posing questions to each other as points of commonality and comparison in their shared experiences emerged.

Whilst recognising the challenges of confidentiality posed through a focus group methodology (Sim and Waterfield, 2019), this methodology was selected as the risk of harm and sensitivity of disclosures personal to participants was identified as low. The intention of this study was not to report individual viewpoints as per a case study design. It was to triangulate that which is represented in the national data with the lived experience of knowledgeable professionals in the AP sector.

Focus group discussions were digitised so that participants could join remotely from their settings, using online conferencing through Microsoft Teams, a methodology that has been evolving both before and since the pandemic (de Souza *et al.*, 2024; Gamhewage *et al.*, 2022; Lobe and Morgan, 2021). In this study, it enabled focused professional discussions to take place and overcome barriers of time and location in ways parallel to the online learning solutions being discussed. Three focus groups took place with two or three participants in each, representing 7 of the 17 initially surveyed settings.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Faculty of Education and Children's Services Ethics Committee at The University of Chester. Research was conducted in accordance with British Education Research Association's ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants and approval granted from the remote online education provider being used by all settings.

Analysis of primary data

Given the small sample size of this study, it is acknowledged that whilst valuable preliminary insights can be gleaned which contribute to the understanding of AP delivered through the online learning medium, this data is not statistically robust. It is nevertheless useful (Kraemer and Blasey, 2015). Findings from this data should be interpreted as exploratory rather than definitive and as a tool to guide further research.

To uphold participant confidentiality (Bloor and Bloor, 2019; Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Sim, 1998), comments and insights from the discussion are presented at collective level, rather than attributed to specific individuals. Care has been taken to remove potential identifiers from the data. Whilst comments are cited to illustrate specific points, this is not to suggest that a consensus amongst all participants is being represented. Rather, the intention is to provide indicative comments that contribute to the understanding of remote online AP. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) enabled the themes and perspectives that emerged during the discussions to be surfaced but does not assume other viewpoints do not exist, either within the focus groups themselves or the AP sector at large.

This is an exploratory paper, aiming to prioritise practitioner perspectives. Analysis highlights the commonalities of the challenges they face and establishes the perceived effectiveness of remote online learning to respond to the research aims of this paper.

Findings and analysis

A national surge in demand

In this section, findings pertaining to the secondary analysis of the Department of Education data are discussed.

The demand for AP in England has grown exponentially, though the reliability of statistics regarding AP is problematic. Issues range from the gaps in the data, inconsistencies in reporting mechanisms and the fluidity of student populations (Centre for Social Justice, 2022; House of Commons Library, 2022; IntegratED, 2022). Department for Education publications which are informed by the school census statistic team that gathers data via the school census and AP census returns in England categorise AP as follows:

- state-funded AP schools;
- school-arranged AP; and
- local authority funded AP in non-state-funded provision. (GOV.UK, 2024a)

State-funded AP schools in the UK provide full- or part-time education for students unable to attend mainstream settings. These include free schools, special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), all overseen by local authorities and regulated by Ofsted. Free schools, funded by the Department for Education but independent of local authority control, have greater flexibility in organisation and curriculum. They are often run by businesses, charities or parents seeking alternative education methods. PRUs serve students facing barriers to education because of behavioural issues, exclusion, illness or other reasons. Special schools cater specifically to students with significant SEND. School-arranged AP refers to provision organised, managed and funded directly by a mainstream school for its students. Schools retain responsibility for the student's education, welfare and safety and may select either state or non-state-funded provision. Local authority-funded AP in non-state-funded settings involves placements arranged and financed by local authorities (LAs). LAs in England ensure education services for all children in their locality. In this category, provision is delivered by non-state-funded institutions such as private schools, charitable organisations or community groups. These distinctions are important in exploring the data that represents a surge in demand for AP. Developing an accurate understanding requires the collation of data from multiple, often incongruent sources and concerns over the oversight and regulation levels applied to AP setting are frequently cited.

Whilst state-funded AP school places increased by 20% in the year to June 2024 (GOV.UK, 2024a), this remains below the pre-pandemic levels which may give the misconception that the demand for AP has been static over the past five to six years (Figure 1). The surge in demand does not become clear until the data for school-arranged and LA-funded AP are reviewed. Over the same period, the demand for LA-funded AP has almost doubled from just over 26,000 students in 2018–2019 to over 48,000 students in 23–24, representing an 84% increase over the past six years and the rate of this increase is accelerating. Unlike the number of students accessing state-funded AP schools which appeared stagnant during the pandemic, LA-funded AP continued to rise by over 9% despite school closures, and in the post-pandemic years between 2021–2022 and 2022–2023, this accelerated to just over 16% and continued to climb again past year to an almost 17% increase 2024 (GOV.UK, 2024a).

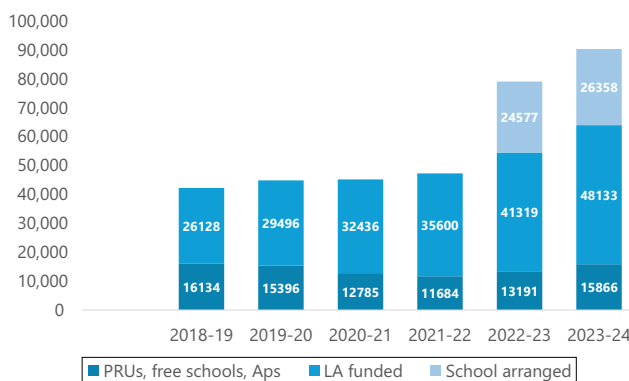


Figure 1. Students in pupil referral units, free schools and alternative provisions, local authority-funded and school-arranged provision 2018–2024

Source(s): Author's own work, drawing on data from GOV.UK (2024a)

Data on the volume of school-arranged AP is not available for the years before 2022–2023, as it was not reported within the GOV.UK statistics, but the inclusion of this data since further emphasises the surge in demand (Figure 1).

When available data is reviewed holistically to take account of all three categories now available (not discounting those students who may have received school-based provision in earlier years, but being unable to include them as no record is available), the increase between 2018–2019 and 2023–2024 is nearing 114%.

The evidence for a surge in demand is clear. What requires greater interrogation are the reasons for this surge and the student groups are most frequently impacted.

Behaviour

Within the definitions and routes into AP previously cited, exclusion, illness or other reasons were specified (Department for Education, 2018a, 2018b). This foregrounds a link between AP and behaviour. In the 2023–2024 data, there is an emphasis put on behaviour as a trigger for school-arranged AP with the citation of 55.3% of placements having been recorded with “off-site placement for behavioural support” as the reason for AP (GOV.UK, 2024a).

Exploring the data surrounding permanent exclusions and suspensions (fixed-term exclusions) as an indicative measure of behavioural issues reveals increases over the past three years. The most recent data set published in July 2024 reports on 2022–2023 (Table 1). This data is reviewed and presented by the Department for Education on a termly basis, potentially to identify where in the academic year students are most likely to be excluded.

To focus on the change between the past two complete data sets for 2021/2022 and 2022/2023, the increase for suspensions was 20% in one academic year, and there was an increase for permanent exclusions of 44% during that same period. Whilst most suspensions and exclusions occur in mainstream schools, there are noted significant increases in permanent exclusion (53%) and suspension (20%) within special schools over the past reported year. Whilst a much smaller number of students, it is worthy of consideration when examining the implications for AP for students with SEND.

Send

England’s SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, 2015) categorises four broad areas of need related to cognition and learning,

Table 1. Permanent exclusions and suspensions 2020–2023

Period	No. of permanent exclusions (%)		No. of suspensions (%)	
Autumn 2022 / 2023	3,103	↑79	247,106	↑54
Autumn 2021 / 2022	2095		183,647	
Autumn 2020 / 2021	1,737		159,988	
Spring 2022 / 2023	3,039	↑39	263,904	↑31
Spring 2021 / 2022	2,179		201,088	
Spring 2020 / 2021	COVID impacted data		Covid impacted data	
Summer 2022 / 2023	3,234	↑90	275,951	↑85
Summer 2021 / 2022	2,221		193,545	
Summer 2020 / 2021	1,700		149,342	

Source(s): Author’s own work, drawing on data from GOV.UK (2024c)

communication and interaction, sensory or physical needs or social, emotional or mental health.

Secondary analysis of the same data set (GOV.UK, 2024a) reveals that of the students receiving school-arranged AP, 23.9% of pupils had an EHCP and a further 42.5% were in receipt of SEN support, meaning over two thirds of students accessing school-based AP have SEND. Other characteristics are also over-represented in the cohort; 62.8% of pupils were male and 55.0% of pupils were eligible for free school meals – an indicator of social deprivation in England (compared to 24.6% for all school pupils). However, it is the link between AP and SEND that is explored here. “Behaviour support” having been cited as the primary reason for AP for many students, whilst an even greater proportion of students in AP have SEND, generates possible conjecture around whether behavioural issues may have a connection to lacking or insufficient support for SEND as an underlying cause. To better understand the cohort of students accessing AP through state-funded AP schools, it is also necessary to triangulate these figures with the data recorded in EHCPs reporting for 2024 (GOV.UK, 2024b). This enables comparisons to be drawn between AP schools, mainstream settings and special schools to identify the trends specifically relating to students with EHCPs. This data set runs from 2015 to the end of 2023 and is presented in linear rather than academic years, that is, January to January, which makes academic year comparison unfeasible. Nonetheless, what this data clearly shows is that the number of students with EHCPs has grown across this period (Figure 2).

EHCPs are a crude measure of SEND, as this makes no consideration of those awaiting assessment, diagnosis or yet unidentified through formal means. Furthermore, not all students with SEND are eligible for an EHCP; there is a graduated approach to supporting SEND in schools, and an EHCP is usually only issued for those students with more complex or long-term needs that require ongoing support. However, its relevance here is in exploring where students with EHCPs are educated (Table 2). To acknowledge the COVID-19 impact on the data, the data can be reviewed in the years before and after pandemic. In the years

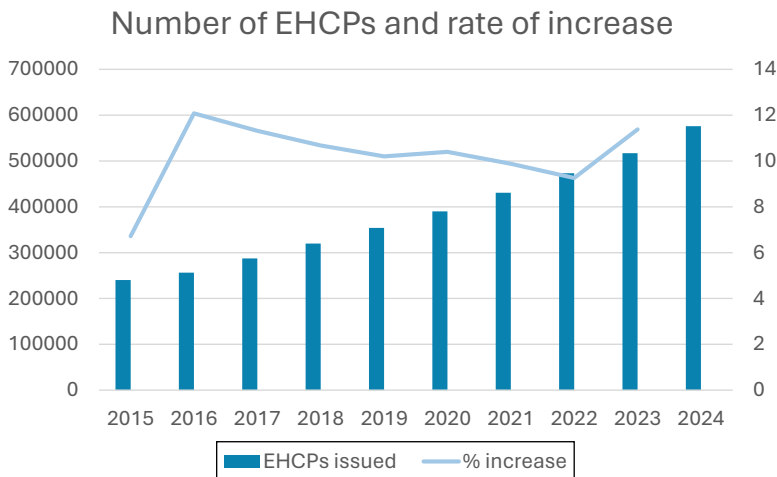


Figure 2. Education, health and care plans issued and rate of increase 2015–2024
Source(s): Author’s own work, drawing on data from GOV.UK (2024b)

Table 2. Education settings of students with education, health and care plans 2016–2024

Education setting	2016	2021	Increase 2016–2021 (%)	2021	2023	2024	Increase 2021–2024 (%)	Increase 2016–2024 (%)
<i>State</i>								
Mainstream schools	116,499	164,511	+41	164,511	211,756	249,392	52	+114
Special schools	101,528	132,306	+30	132,306	170,972	186,036	41	+83
AP/PRU and free schools	1,501	3,064	+104	3,064	3,835	4608	50	+207
All students with EHCPs	236,806	325,618	+38	325,618	412,342	575,963	77	+143

Source(s): Author's own work, drawing on data from [GOV.UK \(2024b\)](#)

before the pandemic – 2016–2021, there was an increase in the number of EHCPs of 38%. The greatest increase by setting is within the category of APs, PRUs and free schools; 104%.

This trend slowed after pandemic; though the number of EHCPs continued to rise, the increase in APs, PRUs and free schools dropped to 50% with both mainstream schools and special schools increased significantly to 52% and 41%, respectively. This might create the impression that the number of students in need of AP/PRU and free school placements reduced during this time.

However, this does not provide a full picture. At the end of 2021, there were 325,618 students in with EHCPs. Those in mainstream, special schools or APs/PRUs and free schools with an EHCP totalled 299,881 students, equating to 92%. However, by 2024, the total number of students with EHCPs had risen by 143% to 575,963. At the same time, the proportion of students in mainstream, special schools or APs/PRUs and free school dropped to 76%. This suggests 24% of all students with EHCPs were outside of these settings. Whilst a direct correlation cannot be drawn with the previous data set for students in school-arranged and LA-funded AP because these two data sets do not cover the same reporting periods, there is a supposition a large proportion of those students are receiving provision in school-arranged and LA-funded AP. The exact number of students in this type of provision is opaque at best.

Whilst the intention is not to debate the most appropriate settings for students with SEND or EHCPs within this paper, it is of significant note that those students accessing AP in its varying forms are increasingly likely to have SEND needs.

Identifying high-quality, high-impact provisions

The surge in demand, complexity of the cohort and lack of capacity in registered and regulated settings dictates that meeting that demand without casting a wider net for provision is simply not possible. This poses a problem:

Q1. How can settings identify high-quality, high-impact provisions (aim 2)?

Within existing policies and guidance documentation, there is some direction, but its contemporary relevance is questionable.

The statutory guidance for AP, published more than a decade ago, states:

Good alternative provision is that which appropriately meets the needs of pupils which required its use and enables them to achieve good educational attainment on par with their mainstream peers.

All pupils must receive a good education, regardless of their circumstances or the settings in which they find themselves. (GOV.UK, 2013, p. 10)

Many have discussed the challenges in ensuring and assuring quality in AP in the absence of robust quality assurance mechanisms (Enow and Kaptcia, 2024; Greenhouse Learning, 2024; Centre for Social Justice, 2022; Education Policy Institute, 2020). The conservative government's SEND review and resulting report entitled "SEND review: right support, right place, right time," (GOV.UK, 2022) established a closer link between SEND and AP, which resulted in the SEND and AP improvement plan (GOV.UK, 2023b). Whilst this set out a vision for national standards to be set for SEND and AP, it fell short of identifying these standards. The then conservative government had intended to publish a significant proportion of the national standards by the end of 2025, but the government has since changed and what the next steps in identifying and much less enforcing standards in the AP sector will be remains to be seen.

What can be deduced from this analysis is that there is little of substance for school leaders, local authorities and AP settings to draw upon when attempting to identify high-

quality, high-impact provisions. Furthermore, what works for some students will not necessarily work for all, as is clear from the rising number of students in need of AP. In the absence of more robust guidance, narrative evidence and experiential data as is presented in this paper becomes essential.

Moreover, in a climate where there are seemingly not enough physical settings for students to access locally, an option to learn remotely, from any location is advantageous. It should be noted that remote online learning as discussed in this study specifically entails the students logging into a timetabled lesson simultaneously with a fully qualified teacher, trained in online learning delivery.

Survey findings

The primary survey data, though small in sample, is explored here to contextualise the demand for AP as experienced by the participants included within the study. It determined that all but one of the settings ($n = 17$) using online learning as an alternative education provision were experiencing an increase in demand. It established that most demand was at secondary school level; the final two years of compulsory secondary education in England, typically for students aged 14–16 years old and corresponding to Years 10 and 11 in England. However, it also revealed some settings were also seeing increased demand for AP at all stages of education from age 5–18 years.

The survey data also illustrated some of the participants' perceptions on the specific student needs contributing to the increased demand for AP. Of the 17 participants, 14 referenced social, emotional and mental health, but this need was arguably also reflected in terms such as "low self-esteem," "lack of resilience," "anxiety" and "school refusal" or "EBSA." Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is a common term in the English school setting to denote Emotionally Based School Avoidance. These needs were a key area for discussion within the later focus groups. It is also referred to as EBSNA; Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance but has previously been known as school avoidance or school refusal. The move away from terms such as "avoidance" and "refusal" can be interpreted as a conscious distancing from a discourse of absence as defiant or oppositional behaviour and towards an understanding of the complex underlying causes for absence.

In terms of the barriers faced in securing AP for their students, the most frequent response within the surveys was "cost." This implied that the costing of AP and the funding or lack thereof formed a barrier to education for students in the participants' experience. This too was interesting to explore further within the focus group discussions, as there is the potential for an assumption that students have funding streams available to them, but this is not always the case.

Focus group discussions

The findings established as part of the focus group discussions not only exemplified the surge in demand experienced by participants and their settings but also provided a rich source of data to examine in relation to the use of remote online education. This will be explored here.

The surge in demand for AP was further emphasised with participants giving both descriptive and specific, numeric representations of this. The situation was presented as overwhelming, with participants' language reflecting the intensity of the challenges experienced:

We have been inundated with referrals and I'm turning people away all the time [...].

We have seen a surge across the board [...] I think everyone struggled and we've definitely had more referrals [...].

I'm getting a constant stream [...].

There's a higher cry now for us to have provisions.

Other participants were able to quantify the rise in demand, with one participant citing a 70% increase in referrals from the 15 secondary and numerous primary schools their provision supported. Others highlighted specific instances of their services being stretched beyond capacity, such as catering to nearly four times the usual number of students at one point and, at another, describing the rise over the four years they had been in post from 12 to 88 students being under their care. This reinforced the lived experiences of participants that were earlier reflected in the exploration of national data.

Challenges for leaders

The reasons for the surge in demand were discussed at length. Participants' accounts reflected on many of the same complex factors evident in the literature including higher exclusion rates, the struggles their students have in accessing and maintaining provision within mainstream schools, lack of spaces in other settings such as special schools and PRUs, extensive waiting lists for medical and mental health services and students' complex needs being at odds with the culture of performativity at schools:

[...] the harder the mainstream schools push and create a box for children, the more that creates the demand for AP. I don't believe AP should have to exist. I've never believed that. Like, we shouldn't have our jobs because schools should be able to accommodate and be inclusive, but that's not the case. So, whilst there continues to be a push for league tables and attendance and targets, then we will continue to need to exist and it's not good for children because they feel potentially isolated [...].

Of the reasons explored previously for the rise in demand for AP, this response resonates with the debates surrounding the dynamics of inclusion when juxtaposed with the need for schools to prioritise academic performance (Done and Andrews, 2020). Participants were also able to reflect on the challenges leaders face not just in securing provision but also in terms of effectively supporting the students' needs within this cohort. Responses were varied but centred around limited space in specialist provisions, mainstream settings being unable to accommodate needs because of limited resources and a perceived lack of flexibility in their systems, particularly in being able to prioritise learning beyond academic progress and focus on more holistic provisions:

What we're seeing in this area is that there is[...there's] not enough specialist provision for students who have EHCP [...] The responsibility lies with mainstream schools [...] and they can't be as creative as they need to be within the resources that they have.

Well, you know, they do get lost a little bit in the system, unfortunately. They do [...] Timetable wise, we can't offer what (alternative) provisions can, you know the bespoke timetable, the vocational, the therapeutic stuff which they do. We, as a school [...] we are predominantly looking for grades [...].

Whilst the high prevalence of SEND needs were anticipated based on the national data, the vulnerability of students within the cohort was also discussed as a particular concern. Students requiring AP were identified as being not only at risk of having social, emotional

and mental health-care needs but also more vulnerable to exploitation and gang violence too, something not explicit in the previous data, but not surprising to those working within the sector:

Vulnerability of these young people is massive as well. They are very, very vulnerable. We have a high level of girls self-harming. It's extremely high. CIS [cisgender]. We're concerned we're getting everything from them, you know, county lines, gang affiliation to grooming. You know it's all there.

The challenge of securing sufficient funding was often described as a result of limited access to other services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and assessments for other special educational needs. There are in England often long waiting lists for access to these services. This formed a further barrier to access to education and the subsequent moves between educational settings:

[...] An absolute blockage in special schools means we're holding a lot [of students], more of the schools are being asked to put packages in. They're all kind of like rabbits and headlights. Our SENCOs [special educational needs coordinators] are going, how do we do that? How do we get tutors? How do we get a package? So, there's a real demand there, I would say. And also one of our main blockages is a child getting treatment through CAMHS, for example. I would say [the local authority] have kind of changed their expectation in terms of what level of medical sign-off is needed because the CAMHS waiting list for some children up to 13 months. They're kind of sitting in hospital education and reintegration services needing, you know, as much [support] as possible because they're not getting better as they should be, you know, undergoing treatment to get them back into school far more quickly [...].

[...] it's really hard because some of our entrance criteria for specialist provision sometimes needs that diagnosis or classification [...] the children can be waiting up to three years. A lot of parents have gone privately locally here, definitely because they just need the diagnosis and the system's almost stuck, isn't it?

Whilst challenges were varied and participants contributed different viewpoints because of the different local systems in place, collectively they reflect a complex and demanding environment in which leaders, educators and AP settings must navigate and overcome: limited resources, bureaucratic delays and the growing needs of vulnerable student cohorts. Participants also discussed the lack of legislative support for AP, reflecting on outdated policies and practices being informed by legislation written more than a decade ago:

It's a central government thing and a local government thing in terms of making sure the right support is directed and the right funding is directed to the students of the EHCPs and to make sure that firstly there's enough specialist provision [...] That funding needs to be able to direct the right resources at the right time to ensure that all of those students who are at home waiting for provision, for however long, can get that much earlier.

The impact of COVID-19

In early 2023, when data collection began, the longer-term impact of disruptions to learning caused by COVID-19 were still being keenly felt. Participants noted that during lockdown, many students, particularly those with additional needs or those described as vulnerable, were even more likely to be isolated from their peers and subsequently further disengaged from education.

In addition, in the participants' accounts, it emerged that these students may have the most difficult pathways back into schooling following school closures that occurred in England during the COVID-19 pandemic:

It's the hangover from COVID that has that has created this significant surge I would say.

Whilst demand for AP was not solely attributed to legacy issues arising from COVID-19, it was evident its impacts continued to pose significant issues with integration in mainstream. Schools' efforts to reintegrate students after lockdown were described as adopting a "zero tolerance" approach when dealing with behaviour and re-establishing routines, which was attributed to increased exclusions and further demand:

The return, certainly in this area, was almost like zero tolerance, so a lot of schools were having this "these are our rules" and I felt they thought that that was the best way to kind of get kids back into a routine. But unfortunately, it's the disadvantaged students who maybe didn't have a great COVID or, you know, their education chances are slightly lower than most, they were the ones that sort of got missed and got lost and got permanently excluded, so I think as much as the schools were trying to do the right thing in terms of getting kids back into routines, boundaries, structures, etcetera, that was to the detriment of disadvantaged pupils.

Additionally, participants talked about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on attendance, exploring how not having to attend school during lockdown period had a legacy impact on the perception of school attendance for many:

I think what happened is the kind of young people that come through to us were pretty much ignored after lockdown. You know, they got used to not attending school. It was OK, you know, for attendance not to be chased. I think they didn't come to the top of the pile in terms of priorities with for referrals. And the upshot was that a lot of the young people we have now have spent up to two years pretty much sitting at home, being quite socially isolated, not being chased for their education. And not being a priority then obviously that has a massive knock-on effect now.

In addition to students being described as "not classroom ready" following the pandemic, there was an acknowledgment of the ongoing issues with accessing services and long waiting times. This was perceived as an ongoing issue but in part attributed to the legacy of COVID-19, and there was a consensus that this was not likely to alter:

I think before COVID, our numbers were on an upward trajectory anyway. I don't envisage them going back to where they were before, but maybe slowing down. I think. I think you know in terms of the medical support children get, it's gonna take a long time to get back to the point where that's very timely. So no, I'm not very hopeful that numbers will ever drop back down.

[...] when we're looking at disadvantaged pupils and disadvantaged families and students with medical needs and mental health needs, I don't ever see that changing because it's the wider economy, wider living crisis, wider NHS services that are impacting the work that we do. I thought I don't see changing in the near future.

It was evident from the focus group that there were no straightforward solutions in terms of meeting or reducing demand. COVID-19's legacy cannot be undone. Building capacity in physical settings such as specialist provisions can neither be instantaneous nor would it be a suitable solution for all students described here. Altering the potentially damaging performative culture of education is not likely to occur without systemic or even global change. Furthermore, reducing waiting lists for medical and mental health services was described with little prospect for change. The solutions required are structural and complex and what was established in examining the challenges faced is that they are significantly beyond the control of school leaders and educational practitioners working towards securing AP. Nevertheless, they are required to find ways to overcome or at least circumvent these challenges to meet the educational needs of the students in their care as best they can.

Remote online learning effectiveness

All school leaders and educational practitioners in this study had used remote online learning to provide alternative education provision for their students. Examining whether this was providing a viable, sustainable model (aim 3) was addressed within the focus group. The findings here are also germane when considering the potential for remote online learning to contribute towards the enactment of SDG4; access to inclusive and equitable quality education may be provided through mediums other than through traditional mainstream education systems.

Examples of the various ways in which remote online learning was being deployed included:

- within mainstream school settings as an internal provision;
- home-based learning provision;
- as part of a PRU or alternative education setting offer;
- to build capacity or to deliver a wider subject offer;
- to ensure teaching fulfilled the exam syllabus specifications of qualification where a specialist was not employed in a setting;
- by local authorities for provision for students with medical needs;
- to fulfil legal requirements to provide education for students excluded from school;
- to provide educational access for students with medical needs;
- to provide education continuity during out-of-county moves;
- providing short-term respite packages as an alternative to a PRU placement; and
- in support of reintegration following EBSA.

Participants went on to describe specific examples where needs had been met using remote online provision from their perspectives, which often related to them being able to support more students than previously possible, but ultimately, remote online learning had enabled students who were unable to access mainstream education to still receive an education:

One of our students- she's just been diagnosed with Tourettes. Her being in school with the nightmare of anxiety, of her even getting in the building- it was a nightmare. But she now is [...] She was one of the young ladies who did want to aspire. She had aspiration. She was willing to engage with work. She just couldn't get through the door with us because of all the fears of the people laughing and things like that. This has got her back in education. She's now working the same as everybody else within her year group. So, when we do provide exams, she's showing us that she knows what she's doing. So, we're providing her the right curriculum for a girl who's in the situation she's in and that's where it's been more valuable to us than anything.

This sentiment was echoed across other participants. However, another emerging theme was the notion of ensuring students were able to “keep up” with their learning, so that they could re-engage and reintegrate into the mainstream once places became available:

[...] a big part of the work is about reintegration and keeping up educationally up for the chances of them reintegrating somewhere. It might not be there their original school.

It was also clear that participants felt online learning enabled students, already disadvantaged by being out of mainstream settings, were not limited further by being unable to study subjects of their choosing:

[...] for us it's really important to be able to bring on board a (remote online teacher) expert to deliver something that a young person wants to study. So, I always try to meet the interest and the need of each young person in a bespoke way, so that helps us to do that.

Positive responses were also noted regarding the quality of the lessons from students' perspectives and the rapport built with their teachers:

The feedback we've got from them (students) is the lessons are there [hand gesture for high]. The same for building rapport, they build that with teacher assigned, it's been fantastic for them. It's worked.

In addition, the ability of online teachers to adapt to meet students' needs was also identified as a highlight:

(The) teachers that we've worked with have been fantastic. They've been really flexible and have made resources that sort of support our students in a bespoke way that's meant it's going to be quite meaningful.

It is pertinent to note again that this form of remote online provision was delivered by qualified teachers, trained in online lesson delivery. These successes may not be replicated without such conditions being maintained.

Challenges

Whilst there were many positives noted and participants were demonstrably satisfied with the quality and impact of the remote online provision that they had experienced, it should also be noted that this did neither negate all challenges nor did it work universally for all students. Some students responded very well, but others had not accessed the provision or were only doing so when supervised, making attendance an ongoing challenge:

I would say that we found it more successful when it's been in school when we've had like a learning support teacher or a support teacher there in the room as well. When on the rare occasions where we've had some students accessing from home for say, part of the day, they just haven't logged on. It's been really difficult. They need a person to motivate them to log on and, you know, that's hard.

Whilst this is not unique to online AP, with attendance in APs typically being significantly lower than in mainstream, it is a difficulty that warrants further exploration. Participants were keen to explore hybrid models where students still entered a physical space within a school setting (or similar) and had a teacher or support worker available to them but used remote online learning for their academic provision.

There were challenges discussed beyond student engagement and attendance, such as managing students' independent learning skills and addressing the potential risks associated with unsupervised internet access:

Because of the way they use the Internet and some of the orders that are around "looked after children" [a term describing children who are in local authority care] it means they can't have unsupervised access to the Internet and we find it really hard to make our students very focused just on the [learning] platform and not to use that opportunity to go off on the Internet.

What emerged in this discussion within the focus group was that whilst a valuable tool, remote online learning was not a universal solution. Whilst there is scope for it to be a high-quality, high-impact and sustainable solution for some, it will not work for all learners:

I think it's case by case[...]What we've realised is it doesn't work for all of our students but for some this is ideal and others, not we know that's the case.

Professional judgement needs to be deployed in determining which students this AP solution might work for, and the student's individual needs must be considered.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore how schools, local authorities and non-mainstream settings are using remote online learning to create capacity for alternative education provision. This research has demonstrated clearly that there is a national surge in demand, evidenced through both the national data and statistics and through the lived experience of those working within this field.

The challenges faced in securing AP are multitudinous; beyond coping with increased volumes of students, the data also highlights the complexity of needs, particularly in relation to the prevalence of SEND, social, emotional and mental health and vulnerability to social issues which serves to further complicate the securing of suitable alternatives.

Remote online learning is not a panacea, but in some cases, it has been able to provide a high-quality, high-impact alternative for students unable to access mainstream or other over-subscribes alternatives. It has been effective in supporting students with anxiety, medical needs or behaviourally based exclusions, enabling them to engage with education by learning from home or in supervised environments where adequate teaching provision would not otherwise be available. Additionally, remote online learning has allowed for the delivery of a broader curriculum, resulting in students not being disadvantaged by being outside of traditional education settings.

Whilst an argument can be made for remote online learning being used as a sustainable model for alternative education provision, it is also key to emphasise the paramount importance of professional judgement in determining how and when it is appropriate to use remote online learning. The team working to support a student, be that teachers, SENCO, school leaders, mentors or family members, will frequently be best informed to identify what might work for a student in need of AP. Whilst some students have thrived, there are challenges for others in terms of engagement, attendance and the proper use of technology. For some, a hybrid model combining both online learning and in-person support may be a more sustainable and effective solution, whilst for others, online remote learning may simply not be the right solution for them. An individualised, student-centred approach is essential.

The findings of this study suggest that in the face of increasing demand and a lack of capacity in other forms of AP, remote online learning adds a valuable additional option that should form part of a broad and flexible approach to AP which is tailored to individual needs. In terms of SDG4, this paper offers some preliminary evidence to suggest that there is potential for remote online learning to be considered as one vehicle through which access to inclusive and equitable quality education can be provided. Whilst remote online learning has the potential to support schools, local authorities and non-mainstream settings to build capacity and provide high-impact education, further research and policy development are also required. Next steps should also further explore the quality assurance mechanisms for this type of provision and ensure its sustainability in the long term.

References

- Baroutsis, A., Mills, M., McGregor, G., Te Riele, K. and Hayes, D. (2016), "Student voice and the community forum: finding ways of 'being heard' at an alternative school for disenfranchised young people", *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 438-453, doi: [10.1002/berj.3214](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3214).

- Bartram, B. (Ed.) (2018), *International and Comparative Education: contemporary Issues and Debates*, 1st ed., Routledge, doi, London, [10.4324/9781315563091](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315563091).
- BERA (2018), "Ethical guidelines for educational research: Fourth edition", BERA, available at: www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online#publication-dissemination
- Best, M. (2024), "The complex and contradictory nature of alternative education provision", *Cogent Education*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 1-17.
- Bloor, M. and Bloor, T. (2019), "Issues of confidentiality in qualitative research", *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 217-231.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006), "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 77-101.
- Brown, A. and Danaher, P.A. (2019), "CHE principles: facilitating authentic and dialogical semi-structured interviews in educational research", *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 76-90, doi: [10.1080/1743727X.2017.1379987](https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2017.1379987).
- Centre for Social Justice (2022), "What the evidence tells us about good-quality alternative provision", available at: www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/newsroom/what-the-evidence-tells-us-about-good-quality-alternative-provision
- Clarke, E. and Thompson, S. (2024), "Systemic vulnerability as a lens to explore young people's experiences of transition from alternative provision settings to post-16 mainstream education", *Educational Review*, pp. 1-21, doi: [10.1080/00131911.2024.2402804](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2402804).
- Danechi, S. (2018), "Alternative provision in England, house of commons library briefing paper", CBP-8522, available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8522/CBP-8522.pdf> (accessed 3 January 2025).
- Dastyari, A. and Jose, C. (2024), "Achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all: the importance of digital inclusion", *Alternative Law Journal*, Vol. 49 No. 4, pp. 282-287, doi: [10.1177/1037969X241295798](https://doi.org/10.1177/1037969X241295798).
- de Souza, J., Gillett, K., Salifu, Y. and Walshe, C. (2024), "Changes in participant interactions. Using focus group analysis methodology to explore the impact on participant interactions of face-to-face versus online video data collection methods", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 23, p. 16094069241241151, doi: [10.1177/16094069241241151](https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241241151).
- Department for Education (2018a), "Creating opportunity for all", available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b1550c0ed915d2cccc8d30d/Creating_opportunity_for_all_-_AP_roadmap.pdf
- Department for Education (2018b), "Investigative research into alternative provision", available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748910/Investigative_research_into_alternative_provision.pdf
- Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care (2015), "Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years", HM Government, London, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25
- Dişlen Dağgöl, G. and İşpınar Akçayoğlu, D. (2023), "From emergency remote teaching to remote online education: challenges, benefits and differences in EFL setting", *Kastamonu Eğitim Dergisi*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 48-59, doi: [10.24106/kefdergi.1243546](https://doi.org/10.24106/kefdergi.1243546).
- Done, E.J. and Andrews, M.J. (2020), "How inclusion became exclusion: policy, teachers and inclusive education", *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 447-464, doi: [10.1080/02680939.2018.1552763](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2018.1552763).
- Education Policy Institute (2020), "SEND and alternative provision: is policy on the right path?", available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/send-and-alternative-provision-policy/>
- Engelbrecht, J., Borba, M.C. and Kaiser, G. (2023), "Will we ever teach mathematics again in the way we used to before the pandemic?", *ZDM – Mathematics Education*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 1-16, doi: [10.1007/s11858-022-01460-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-022-01460-5).

- Enow, L.O. and Kapcia, S. (2024), "Pupil referral units (PRUs) and alternative education provision; a think piece on making a case for parental choice for children with SEND", *Support for Learning*, Vol. 39 No. 4, pp. 198-202, doi: [10.1111/1467-9604.12504](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12504).
- Ewing, L.-A. and Cooper, H.B. (2021), "Technology-enabled remote learning during covid-19: perspectives of Australian teachers, students and parents", *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 41-57, doi: [10.1080/1475939X.2020.1868562](https://doi.org/10.1080/1475939X.2020.1868562).
- Fisher, D. (2021), *The Distance Learning Playbook for College and University Instruction: teaching for Engagement and Impact in Any Setting*, Corwin, CA.
- Gamhewage, G., Mahmoud, M.E., Tokar, A., Attias, M., Mylonas, C., Canna, S. and Utunen, H. (2022), "Digital transformation of face-to-face focus group methodology: engaging a globally dispersed audience to manage institutional change at the world health organisation", *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Vol. 24 No. 5, p. e28911.
- GOV.UK (2013), "Alternative provision statutory guidance for local authorities", available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-provision
- GOV.UK (2022), "Consultation outcome: SEND review: right support, right place, right time", available at: www.gov.uk/government/consultations/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time
- GOV.UK (2023a), "Policy paper: Accreditation for online education providers", available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/accreditation-for-online-education-providers/accreditation-for-online-education-providers
- GOV.UK (2023b), "Policy paper: SEND and alternative provision improvement plan", available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-and-alternative-provision-improvement-plan
- GOV.UK (2024a), "Schools, pupils and their characteristics, academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics", available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>
- GOV.UK (2024b), "Education, health and care plans, reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics", available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans#dataBlock-fb52ab0a-f88f-4743-ac99-dc64925de13a-charts>
- GOV.UK (2024c), "Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England", Academic year 2022/23, available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england#dataBlock-a8ea416a-a56f-41c9-a808-d64a38366311-tables>
- Greenhouse Learning (2024), "Exploring alternative provision: types, benefits, and challenges in the UK", *Exploring Alternative Provision: Types, Benefits, and Challenges in the UK*, Greenhouse Learning, available at: <https://greenhouselearning.co.uk/exploring-alternative-provision-types-benefits-and-challenges-in-the-uk/>
- House of Commons Library (2022), "Alternative provision education in England", available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8522/CBP-8522.pdf>
- IntegratED (2022), "Investigating alternative provision: part one – IntegratED", available at: www.integrated.org.uk/2021/09/13/investigating-alternative-provision-part-one/
- Johnston, C., Malcolm, A. and Pennacchia, J. (2024), "How is theory used to understand and inform practice in the alternative provision sector in England: trends, gaps and implications for practice", *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, pp. 1-18, doi: [10.1080/13603116.2024.2342363](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2024.2342363).
- Kidd, P.S. and Marshall, M.B. (2000), "Getting the focus and the group: enhancing analytical rigor in focus group research", *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 293-308.
- Kizilcec, R.F., Perez-Sanagustin, M. and Maldonado, J.J. (2017), "Self-regulated learning strategies predict learner engagement and performance in online learning environments", *Computers and Education*, Vol. 104, pp. 18-33, doi: [10.1016/j.compedu.2016.10.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.10.001).
- Kraemer, H.C. and Blasey, C.M. (2015), *How Many Subjects? Statistical Power Analysis in Research*, SAGE Publications, CA.

- Leavy, P. (2017), *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches*, 1st ed., Guilford Press, London.
- Lee, S.W. and Choi, Y.S. (2019), "Utilising bloom's taxonomy to improve questioning strategies in online learning environments", *Educational Technology Research and Development*, Vol. 67 No. 2, pp. 365-381.
- Lobe, B. and Morgan, D.L. (2021), "Assessing the effectiveness of video-based interviewing: a systematic comparison of video-conferencing based dyadic interviews and focus groups", *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 301-312, doi: [10.1080/13645579.2020.1785763](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1785763).
- McCluskey, G., Riddell, S. and Weedon, E. (2015), "Children's rights, school exclusion and alternative educational provision", *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, Vol. 19 No. 6, pp. 595-607, doi: [10.1080/13603116.2014.961677](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.961677).
- Mills, M., Te Riele, K., McGregor, G. and Baroutsis, A. (2017), "Teaching in alternative and flexible education settings", *Teaching Education*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 8-11, doi: [10.1080/10476210.2016.1263613](https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2016.1263613).
- Moore, J.L., Dickson-Deane, C. and Galyen, K. (2011), "e-learning, online learning, and distance learning environments: Are they the same?", *The Internet and Higher Education*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 129-135, doi: [10.1016/j.iheduc.2010.10.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2010.10.001).
- Okano, M.T., dos Santos, H.D.C.L., Ursini, E.L., Fernandes, M.E., Gomes, J.G.C., González-Tejero, C. B. and Gavrilá, S. (2023), "Open and distance learning (ODL): traditional or frugal innovation?", *Contemporary Economics*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 24-42.
- Pennacchia, J. and Thomson, P. (2016), "Complementing the mainstream: an exploration of partnership work between complementary alternative provisions and mainstream schools", *Pastoral Care in Education*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 67-78, doi: [10.1080/02643944.2016.1154094](https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2016.1154094).
- SEN Policy Research Forum (2020), "Exclusions, barriers to admission and quality of mainstream provision for children and young people with SEND: what can be done?", *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs Seminar*, Online, available at: [10.1111/1471-3802.12487](https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12487) (accessed 3 January 2025).
- Shute, V.J. and Rahimi, S. (2021), "Review of formative feedback and assessment in digital learning environments", *Journal of Computer-Assisted Learning*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 930-946, doi: [10.1111/jcal.12570](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12570).
- Sim, J. (1998), "Collecting and analysing qualitative data: issues raised by the focus group", *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 345-352.
- Sim, J. and Waterfield, J. (2019), "Focus group methodology: some ethical challenges", *Quality and Quantity*, Vol. 53 No. 6, pp. 3003-3022, doi: [10.1007/s11135-019-00914-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-019-00914-5).
- Smith, S. (2021), "Finding the voice of students engaging in online alternative provision via digital data collection methods", *British Journal of Educational Technology*, Vol. 52 No. 2, pp. 899-914, doi: [10.1111/bjet.13061](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13061).
- Steed, E.A., Leech, N., Phan, N. and Benzel, E. (2022), "Early childhood educators' provision of remote learning during covid-19", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 60, pp. 307-318, doi: [10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.03.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.03.003).
- Sultana, J. (2020), "Determining the factors that affect the uses of mobile cloud learning (MCL) platform blackboard- a modification of the UTAUT model", *Education and Information Technologies*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 223-238, doi: [10.1007/s10639-019-09969-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-019-09969-1).
- Te Riele, K. (2006), "Schooling practices for marginalised students - practice-with-hope", *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 59-74, doi: [10.1080/13603110500221750](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110500221750).
- Thomas, G. and Loxley, A. (2022), "Groundhog day for inclusive education", *Support for Learning*, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 225-243, doi: [10.1111/1467-9604.12406](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12406).

- Timpson, E. (2019), “Timpson review of school exclusion”, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf
- Trotman, D., Enow, L. and Tucker, S. (2019), “Young people and alternative provision: perspectives from participatory–collaborative evaluations in three UK local authorities”, *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 219-237, doi: [10.1002/berj.3495](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3495).
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2016), “Unpacking sustainable development goal 4: education 2030”, UNESDOC, UN Doc ED-16/ESC-PCR/GD/I (2nd rev ed, 2017) 10, available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246300?posInSet=1&queryId=1f62c2ab-d587-411c-b209-a4d88446b967>

Further reading

- Gillie, S. (2023), “Transition away from school: a framework to support professional understandings”, *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, Vol. 2 No. 1, doi: [10.5334/ijelt.71](https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.71).
- GOV.UK (2025), “Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England spring term 23/24”, available at: <https://exploreeducation-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24-spring-term#dataBlock-a8ea416a-a56f-41c9-a808-d64a38366311-tables>

Corresponding author

Sharon Smith can be contacted at: Sharon.smith_uk@yahoo.com