



Online Alternative Provision: What Should You Be Looking For?

A practical guide for schools, SEND teams and
local authorities

Introduction

Online education is widely available but quality varies dramatically. A research partnership between Nisai Learning and the University of Staffordshire is investigating what makes online provision truly effective.

Emerging evidence shows that, when delivered well, high-quality online teaching can help learners re-engage, rebuild confidence, and make meaningful progress.

This guide draws directly on these insights, offering a practical framework to support those working with vulnerable learners to identify provision that delivers real impact.

Not all online provision is equal. Choosing well makes a real difference.

A framework for evaluating quality

This framework supports decision-makers to assess online provision in a structured, learner-focused way.

Learner-Centred Design

- Provision is tailored to individual needs, not constrained by age or standardised models.
- Programmes are responsive to specific learner profiles, including EBSA, neurodivergence, and medical needs.
- Pathways are flexible, adapting over time and aligning with EHCPs where relevant.

Quality of Teaching & Learning

- Learners access live, interactive teaching, not just pre-recorded content.
- Teaching approaches are adapted for learners with SEND, supporting engagement and accessibility.
- Progress is actively monitored, with clear educational goals and outcomes.

Integration with School and Services

- Provision operates in active partnership with the referring school and/or local authority.
- Communication is structured, regular, and informs wider planning for the learner.
- There is a clear pathway for reintegration into school or progression to a suitable next step.

Pastoral Support and Relationships

- Pastoral care is embedded alongside academic learning, not treated as an add-on.
- Learners are supported to rebuild confidence, routine, and trust in education.
- Families are engaged and supported where appropriate.

Credibility, Safeguarding and Impact

- Providers have an established track record and demonstrable experience.
- Outcomes are evidenced, including reintegration, qualifications, and positive destinations.
- Safeguarding is robust and aligned with statutory expectations.
- Provision is supported by independent validation through recognised educational bodies.

Checklist: the tough questions to ask any online provider

An impactful provider of online alternative provision should confidently answer **YES** to all these questions.

Learner-Centred Design

- Is each learner's programme tailored to their individual needs rather than based on age or cohort?
- Do you adapt your approach to specific learner needs (e.g. EBSA, neurodivergence, medical needs)?
- Do programmes evolve over time as the learner progresses?

Quality of Teaching & Learning

- Do learners regularly receive live, interactive teaching?
- Is teaching specifically adapted for learners with SEND?
- Do you consistently track and report on learner progress?

Integration with School and Services

- Do you work in active partnership with the referring school or local authority?
- Do you communicate regularly with the school and relevant professionals?
- Does your provision form part of a wider plan with a clear pathway to next steps?

Pastoral Support and Relationships

- Is pastoral care embedded within the provision rather than delivered separately?
- Do you actively support learners to rebuild confidence, routine, and engagement?
- Are families appropriately included and supported?

Credibility, Safeguarding and Impact

- Do you have a proven track record in delivering education to similar learners?
- Can you clearly evidence outcomes (e.g. qualifications, reintegration, positive destinations)?
- Are your safeguarding processes aligned with statutory expectations?
- Have you been independently reviewed or validated by recognised bodies?



Scan the QR code to explore the research and practical tools or come and talk to us at the Nisai stand.



This guide has been developed as part of a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) between Nisai Learning and the University of Staffordshire, funded by Innovate UK. This project uses over 5 years of pupil level data to explore how non-traditional approaches to education can better support children and young people to stay engaged, achieve meaningful outcomes, and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Early insights highlight the potential for high-quality online provision to support students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, with evidence of improved attendance, increased engagement, and progression to positive destinations.

This research has directly informed the principles set out in this guide.



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