



Friends or Foes: Decoding OPM Partnerships in Higher Education through Text Mining

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Abstract

This study examines how Online Program Management (OPM) firms articulate their strategic identities through mission statements, assessing the extent to which these communicated values align with those of higher education institutions (HEIs). Drawing on a corpus of 106 OPM mission statements from 15 countries, we apply Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to identify dominant themes and recurrent patterns. The analysis reveals five thematic clusters: educational transformation, learner empowerment, online learning platforms, specialized professional education, and accessible global education. While these themes frequently reference values associated with HEIs they omit critical operational details related to costs, governance, and quality assurance. Such omissions suggest a performative alignment, in which OPMs adopt the rhetoric of academic values without fully committing to them in practice. The findings highlight potential tensions between aspirational narratives and contractual realities, offering guidance for HEI leaders to conduct rigorous due diligence, ensure contractual safeguards, and align partnerships with institutional missions.

Keywords Online program management · Higher education institutions · Mission statements · Strategic alignment · Digital transformation · Managerialism

JEL Classification C63 · I21 · I23 · O30

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Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are undergoing a profound digital transformation, accelerated first by the COVID-19 pandemic (Odunlami, 2023) and more recently by advances in learning analytics and AI (Agarwal et al., 2025). These shifts demand business model innovation (Li et al., 2024) and place significant pressure on academic staff for rapid adaptation (Kassem & Mitsakis, 2025). In response, many institutions are turning to Online Program Management (OPM) partnerships as a strategic means of innovation.

The OPM sector is valued at more than \$15.67 billion, with over 48,000 programs and 17 million students worldwide; and an annual market growth of 16%. Around 57% of HEIs partner at least with one OPM and in North America the rate goes up to 65% (Market Growth Reports, 2025). OPMs represent a relatively new breed of education-technology firms that merge online learning delivery with the outsourcing of core educational functions (Wukich, 2022; Ramani et al., 2022). They typically bundle services such as online course design, digital marketing, student recruitment, and platform support to help HEIs launch or scale degree and certification programs. While outsourcing non-educational functions can allow universities to focus on content development (Gupta et al., 2005), the outsourcing of core educational activities raises questions about academic quality, institutional mission, and student experience (Mintz, 2020), as well as ethical and structural implications for higher education models.

Despite their rapid ascent, OPMs remain underexamined in scholarly literature, creating a clear research gap. In just over a decade, they have evolved from a niche phenomenon into a multi-billion-dollar global industry, with dozens of providers partnering with hundreds of universities worldwide (Education Intelligence Unit, 2019). Their expansion reflects broader pressures for digital transformation, as institutions facing enrollment and financial challenges have turned to OPMs for expedited online program launches and new revenue streams (Smalley, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this reliance, compelling even traditionally campus-based institutions to adopt online delivery and often engage OPMs for rapid capacity-building. Proponents present OPMs as innovative partners that bring capital and expertise to expand access and scale online learning, while critics caution that profit-driven models risk misalignment with academic values, enable extraction from largely nonprofit systems, and blur regulatory boundaries (Smalley, 2021). These competing narratives underscore the need for clearer definitions, deeper understanding of OPM operations, and critical assessment of their role in the higher education ecosystem.

This article addresses this gap by examining the values and priorities that characterize the identity of OPMs as reflected in their mission statements. A mission statement is a strategic tool defining a company's societal role, structure, plans, and purpose (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Despite OPMs' growing presence, their self-described missions and values have not been systematically studied. We do not yet know how these companies portray their role and priorities, or how these align with universities' purposes. Understanding OPMs' identities can inform

institutional partnership decisions and reveal how they may be reshaping higher education models.

Given the novelty of OPM firms and the limited empirical exploration of their strategic identities, this exploratory study aims to lay the groundwork for future theoretical advancements. Specifically, it addresses the following research question: What communicated values and strategic priorities do OPMs highlight in their mission statements, and to what extent do these align with the core academic values of higher education institutions?

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section presents a literature review on OPMs. The following section outlines the research design, including data collection procedures and analytical techniques. Results are then presented, followed by a discussion of the findings. The conclusion addresses implications for theory and practice and offers recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

We review existing literature on OPMs to contextualize our study. First, we examine how OPMs are defined and what services they provide. Next, we discuss why institutions engage OPMs and the benefits and challenges of such partnerships. Finally, we highlight critiques of the OPM model. This review underscores the varied identities and perceptions of OPMs, reinforcing the need for our mission-statement analysis.

What is an OPM

The term *Online Program Management* (OPM) refers to a diverse range of for-profit education-technology companies that partner with higher education institutions (HEIs) to design, deliver, and support online academic programs. While widely used, the term remains contested in both scholarly and industry discourse, with definitions varying across literature, media, and institutional narratives (Smalley, 2021; Sun et al., 2024). OPMs may operate through bundled service models (integrating online course development, digital marketing, student recruitment, technological infrastructure, and learner support) or through *à la carte* models that provide discrete functions such as instructional design, market analysis, or faculty training (Cheslock et al., 2021; Wukich, 2022; Feldstein, 2019). These capabilities allow institutions to expand digital offerings without the full in-house investment that such programs typically require (Coates, 2020; Smalley, 2021; Dewbury, 2024).

OPMs emerged in the early 2000s, with growth accelerating in the 2010s as online education moved into the mainstream (Education Intelligence Unit, 2019). Between 2010 and 2015, many institutions facing stagnant enrolments and growing demand for flexible delivery turned to private partners, fueling rapid market expansion (Dewbury, 2024). By 2020, roughly one-quarter of students enrolled in fully online degree programs were in offerings managed—at least in part—by an OPM (Wilkinson et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified this trend: campus closures pushed even traditional, campus-based institutions toward online

delivery, often relying on OPMs for rapid scaling (Alam, 2021; Dewbury, 2024). As in-person teaching resumed, many HEIs incorporated OPM relationships into long-term digital transformation strategies (Smalley, 2021).

The sector's growth is linked to structural pressures on HEIs: declining enrolments, intensified competition, and rising expectations for technology-enhanced, flexible delivery (Salama & Hinton, 2023; Darby & Lang, 2019; Alexander & Manolchev, 2020). While digitization had been gradual, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, prompting the integration of digital platforms into core teaching and administrative functions (Alam, 2021; Kamssu & Kouam, 2021; DeVaney et al., 2020). OPMs have positioned themselves as pivotal partners for institutions with limited internal capacity.

Proponents present OPMs as strategic allies that fill operational gaps, accelerate innovation in teaching and learning, and, when well-designed, align with institutional missions and maintain academic standards (Dewbury, 2024). Mission statements frequently emphasize commitments to access, quality, collaboration, and student success. Critics, however, caution against the commercialization of core academic functions, citing risks to educational quality, institutional governance, and equity (Smith et al., 2024). Some research links rapid OPM-facilitated expansion to lower retention and graduation rates, describing this as *predatory inclusion*, in which increased access coexists with higher risks of poor outcomes for marginalized groups (Smith et al., 2024). Additional concerns include opaque contractual terms and recruitment practices that may skirt regulations on incentive-based compensation (Turner et al., 2024). The overall effect of OPM partnerships appears contingent on institutional context, contractual design, and the presence of robust governance safeguards.

Partnering with an OPM: Contractual Information

OPM partnerships are generally structured under two main business models. In the revenue-sharing model, the OPM covers upfront costs for program design, technology, marketing, and student support, recouping its investment through an agreed percentage of tuition revenue once students enroll (Turner et al., 2024). Contracts typically span 5–10 years or more, and revenue splits often approach 50% (in some cases reaching 70–80%) of tuition income (Wilkinson et al., 2021). While this arrangement reduces immediate institutional financial risk, it cedes a substantial share of long-term revenue and can give the OPM influence over operational or academic decisions (Smith et al., 2024).

The fee-for-service model involves paying a fixed fee for selected services, without tuition sharing. This model can enhance transparency and institutional control but requires greater upfront investment (Wilkinson et al., 2021). A related category, the Online Program Enabler (OPE), refers to short-term, non-revenue-sharing contracts for targeted services, without full operational control (Gilmore & Nguyen, 2023).

Scope of services varies widely. Some OPMs manage the full student lifecycle while others focus narrowly on platform development or course digitization.

White-labeling is common: programs developed by the OPM are branded under the university's name (Dudley et al., 2021). The growing inclusion of micro- and nano-credential programs within these contracts allows HEIs to target non-traditional learners, such as working professionals, remote students, and individuals with disabilities, while creating new revenue streams from repurposed content (Sharma et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2020).

Risks and exit challenges are considerable. Revenue-share agreements can become financially disadvantageous if enrolment projections are not met (Lieberman, 2017; Maloney & Kim, 2019). Exiting contracts is often costly and procedurally complex due to embedded penalties and reliance on OPM-controlled infrastructure (Maloney & Kim, 2019). Common causes for contract termination include unmet enrolment expectations, insufficient marketing investment, heavy faculty workloads, inadequate instructional design, and negative student perceptions (Carroll-Glover, 2024).

Institutional Need

Decisions to engage an OPM are shaped by a combination of institutional strategy and market demand. From an institutional perspective, younger or lower-prestige universities, often reflected in their ranking positions, may pursue online expansion to differentiate themselves, while older, higher-prestige institutions may seek to broaden reach without altering core on-campus identities (Fumasoli et al., 2020). Limited internal resources, the need for rapid program launches, and competitive positioning all contribute to the appeal of external partnerships.

From a market demand perspective, interest in online, hybrid, and modular credentials has risen sharply due to their flexibility, convenience, and accessibility (Smyrnova-Trybulska et al., 2016). These formats allow learners to balance studies with work and family responsibilities, reduce commuting or relocation costs, and are particularly attractive to non-traditional and lower-income students, supporting social mobility and overcoming geographical barriers (Wang & Li, 2023). Empirical evidence also shapes student choice. Bernard et al. (2004), in a meta-analysis of 232 studies, found no overall difference in achievement, attitudes, or retention between online and classroom instruction, with asynchronous formats performing slightly better, suggesting that instructional design can be as critical as delivery mode. Similarly, Means et al. (2010) concluded that online learning, on average, produced modestly better outcomes than face-to-face instruction, with gains linked to extended learning time, richer resources, and more frequent interaction. Additional studies reinforce the capacity of online and blended models to serve working adults, caregivers, rural students, and those seeking industry-aligned micro-credentials (Raj et al., 2024; Gilmore & Nguyen, 2023). Coupled with the workforce demand for 21st-century skills and lifelong learning (Fuad et al., 2022), these trends make delivery innovation a strategic imperative. OPMs respond to these needs by combining marketing expertise, technological infrastructure, and operational scalability, enabling HEIs to align offerings with market demands and institutional goals (Salama & Hinton, 2023; Morris et al., 2020).

Criticisms

Despite their growth, OPM partnerships face sustained critique regarding their impact on academic integrity, governance, and equity. Concerns include outsourcing core academic functions, loss of institutional control, predatory recruitment practices targeting marginalized students, inadequate data privacy safeguards, and the absence of robust quality assurance mechanisms (Cheslock et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2024; Kim & Maloney, 2020; Ortagus & Derreth, 2020; Raj et al., 2024; Ramani et al., 2022). Some HEIs decide not to partner with OPMs because of misalignment in pedagogical strategy, structures, culture or risk-taking aversion (Cisel, 2023; Morris et al., 2020).

Faculty and administrators have expressed apprehension about the commodification of intellectual property and the prioritization of enrolment growth over pedagogical quality (Hall & Dudley, 2019; Ramani et al., 2022; Williamson, 2020), generating apprehension about this business mindset on educational needs (Salama and Hinton, 2023), measurable quality (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020) or even conflicting with universities' public-serving mission (Jones, 2024; Hall and Dudley, 2019). Such concerns echo broader critiques of managerialism in higher education, which highlight negative effects on teaching quality, governance, and academic freedom (Erickson et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; McCann et al., 2020; Jarvis, 2024; Gumpert, 2000; Wekullo, 2017; Le, 2022). In extreme cases, reliance on for-profit providers can reinforce market-driven logics that overshadow the traditional public-good mission of higher education (Kezar et al., 2019) and foster low-cost models with precarious employment arrangements, transforming universities into "gig academies" (Kezar et al., 2019; Gallagher & Palmer, 2020; Simpson, 2023).

Financial risks are also significant. Long-term revenue-sharing agreements can lock institutions into underperforming programs, particularly if enrolment targets are not achieved (Lieberman, 2017; Maloney & Kim, 2019). Moreover, the opaque nature of some OPM contracts has prompted regulatory scrutiny, especially regarding incentive-based recruitment practices that may circumvent existing bans (Shireman, 2019; Hamilton et al., 2024).

Mission Statements

Given the lack of consensus on OPM definitions and the complexity of their operations, mission statements offer a unique lens for understanding how these firms frame their roles. A mission statement is a strategic communication tool that defines an organization's purpose, structure, and societal role (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). In both higher education and corporate contexts, mission statements help build brand identity, communicate values, and signal alignment with stakeholder expectations (Dumanig & Symaco, 2020; Gimbert, 2011).

For OPMs, mission statements serve not only as public-facing declarations but also as positioning devices in a competitive market. They frequently emphasize values such as access, innovation, and learner empowerment while omitting operational

details like cost structures, governance mechanisms, or contractual terms. This selective presentation can function as performative alignment, where commercial entities articulate commitments that resonate with HEI values to facilitate partnership formation.

Analyzing OPM mission statements can thus reveal both the aspirational narratives companies use to legitimize their presence in higher education and the strategic silences that obscure potential tensions, especially those between commercial imperatives and academic *ethos*. This approach provides a critical perspective on the intersection of corporate strategy and public-good missions in the evolving digital education landscape.

While mission statements can offer insight into how organizations portray their values and priorities, scholars consistently caution against treating them as straightforward reflections of organizational reality. First, mission statements are often aspirational and symbolic rather than operational; they portray idealized images of the organization instead of precise and current practices (Bartkus & Glassman, 2008). This means they frequently function more as branding or legitimizing tools than as concrete strategic directives (Baetz & Bart, 1996).

The relationship between mission statements and actual organizational behavior is indirect and variable (Sufi & Lyons, 2003). Consequently, relying exclusively on mission content risks conflating stated intentions with enacted strategies. Additionally, mission statements are often crafted for multiple audiences, including customers, employees, regulators, and investors, and may therefore contain generalized, non-specific language designed to appeal broadly (Macedo et al., 2016). This breadth can obscure important tensions, trade-offs, and operational realities.

Finally, because mission statements are strategic communication artifacts, they are subject to internal and external institutional pressures. They may reflect the preferences of dominant coalitions within the organization or be shaped to align with prevailing market or policy discourses, thereby masking dissenting perspectives or contested priorities (David et al., 2014). As such, while mission statements can be analytically valuable for understanding how organizations wish to be perceived, they are insufficient as a standalone lens for assessing actual values, strategies, or impacts.

Material and Methods

Research Design

Given the textual and thematic complexity inherent in organizational mission statements, traditional qualitative methods might overlook subtle linguistic patterns. Therefore, we chose Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a probabilistic topic modeling technique, specifically for its capacity to systematically uncover latent themes within large text corpora. LDA effectively captures intricate patterns of word co-occurrences and assigns these to distinct, interpretable topics, making it especially suitable for analyzing the multifaceted strategic language used by OPM firms. LDA was particularly well-suited to capture the diverse and complex language present in

OPM mission statements, which often reflect multifaceted priorities. This method aligns with the study's goal of exploring the definitional boundaries of OPMs, as it reveals their linguistic and conceptual elements.

Procedure

We collected mission statements from 106 OPM providers worldwide, according to the distribution in Table 1.

This broad sample captures a diverse range of OPM firms globally. LDA, a probabilistic topic modeling algorithm, is utilized to identify key themes and topics within the texts and elucidate the significant elements of the mission statements and thematic patterns with natural language processing (NLP) (Xia et al., 2014). LDA is advantageous over manual or purely qualitative analyses due to its objectivity, replicability, and scalability. By probabilistically modeling each document as a distribution of topics rather than relying on subjective categorization, it minimizes researcher bias and increases analytical rigor. Additionally, LDA allows systematic handling of large datasets, enabling robust thematic clustering that reveals underlying conceptual patterns in OPM strategic narratives, beyond surface-level interpretations.

LDA addresses the critical limitations of bibliometric analysis and systematic literature reviews (Rejeb et al., 2024). The study captures the prevalence and interrelationships of key terms, providing deeper insights into the shared values and priorities underpinning OPMs' identity through embedding techniques. Before applying LDA, we cleaned and prepared the text data by removing stop words, standardizing terms, and so forth (see Figure 1 for the data preprocessing flowchart). In particular, we removed stop words, common terms such as "and", "the", and "is",

Table 1 OPM geographical distribution

Country	Frequency
United States	45
Singapore	22
Indonesia	15
Vietnam	5
Australia	3
India	3
Thailand	3
China	2
England	2
Argentina	1
Scotland	1
France	1
Cyprus	1
Philippines	1
Malaysia	1

Creation based on content analysis. Own elaboration

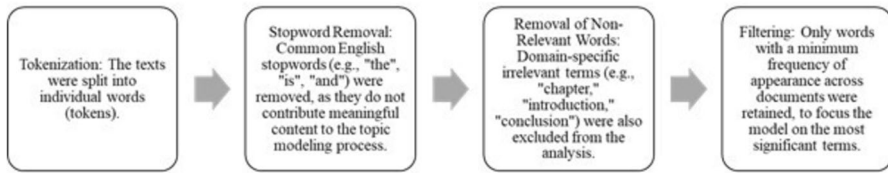


Fig. 1 Flowchart of the data process. Note. Preparation and ‘cleaning’ of words prior to analysis. Own elaboration.

that do not contribute semantic meaning. This step enhances topic coherence by focusing on content-bearing terms that better reflect thematic emphasis (Miles et al., 2019). The use of LDA supports bias reduction through algorithmic identification of themes, avoiding selective manual coding (Rejeb et al., 2024).

The cleaned text data was then used to develop an LDA 5-topic model. Hyperparameters in LDA significantly influence topic distribution and coherence. We selected $\alpha = 0.1$, promoting topic sparsity and ensuring each mission statement primarily associates with a few dominant topics. We set $\beta = 0.01$ to enhance topic distinctiveness, allowing each topic to be clearly defined by a specific set of representative keywords. These parameter choices were determined after iterative experimentation and optimization, guided by maximizing semantic coherence and interpretability of the identified topics.

For model fitting, the LDA was trained using the Gibbs sampling algorithm (Qiu et al., 2014), which iteratively adjusted the assignment of words to topics over 1000 iterations to ensure convergence. The model was implemented in Python using the Gensim library. To assess the quality and coherence of the topics generated by the LDA model, we used the following evaluation techniques:

Perplexity: A measure of how well the model fits the data.

Topic Coherence: A metric used to evaluate the semantic interpretability of the topics by measuring how often the high-probability words in a topic appear together in the same documents.

Despite LDA’s effectiveness, its requirement for a predetermined topic number can pose interpretative challenges. To mitigate this, we systematically tested models ranging from three to seven topics, evaluating each using statistical coherence metrics and semantic interpretability. We then selected the optimal five-topic model, balancing complexity and interpretability, which offered meaningful thematic clarity without oversimplifying the rich content found in the mission statements. Once the model was optimized, the three topics generated by LDA were interpreted by reviewing each topic’s top 10 most significant words. These words were carefully analyzed to identify the thematic elements concerning the definition of OPM mission statements. Topics were then labeled based on their word composition. All data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Finally, the text preprocessing, LDA modeling, and data visualization were performed using Python for text cleaning and LDA implementation.

Table 2 Top 15 Terms in OPM Mission Statements

Term	Frequency
Learning	47
Student	44
Education	40
Help	29
Online	28
University	24
Mission	24
Program	19
Company	18
Learner	17
Educational	15
Provide	14
World	14
Skill	14
Access	13

Creation based on content analysis. Own elaboration

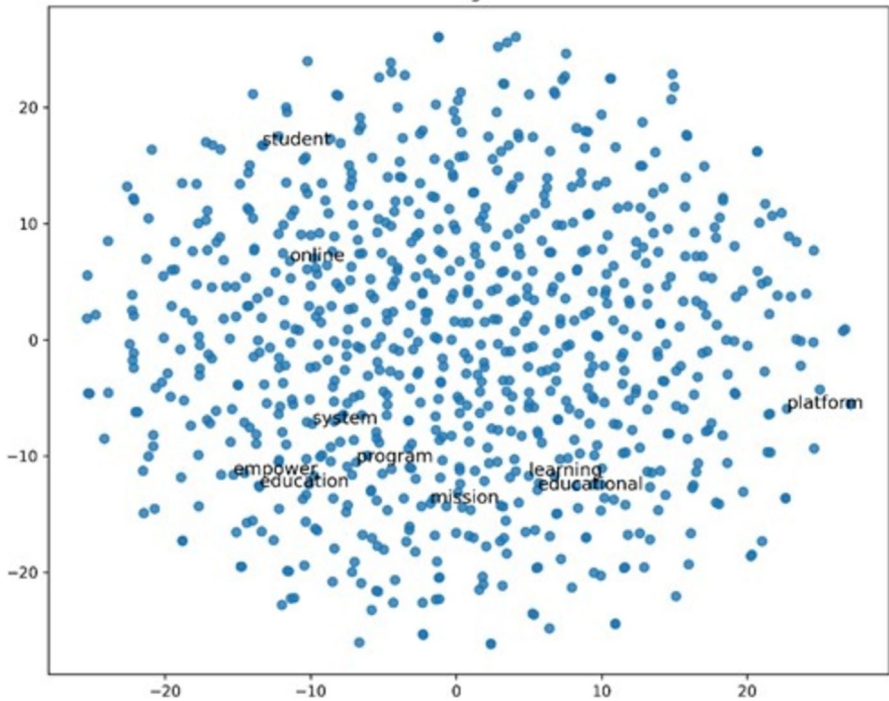


Fig 3 OPM Mission Word Embedding visualization. Note. This map reflects closeness in meaning and context. Own elaboration.

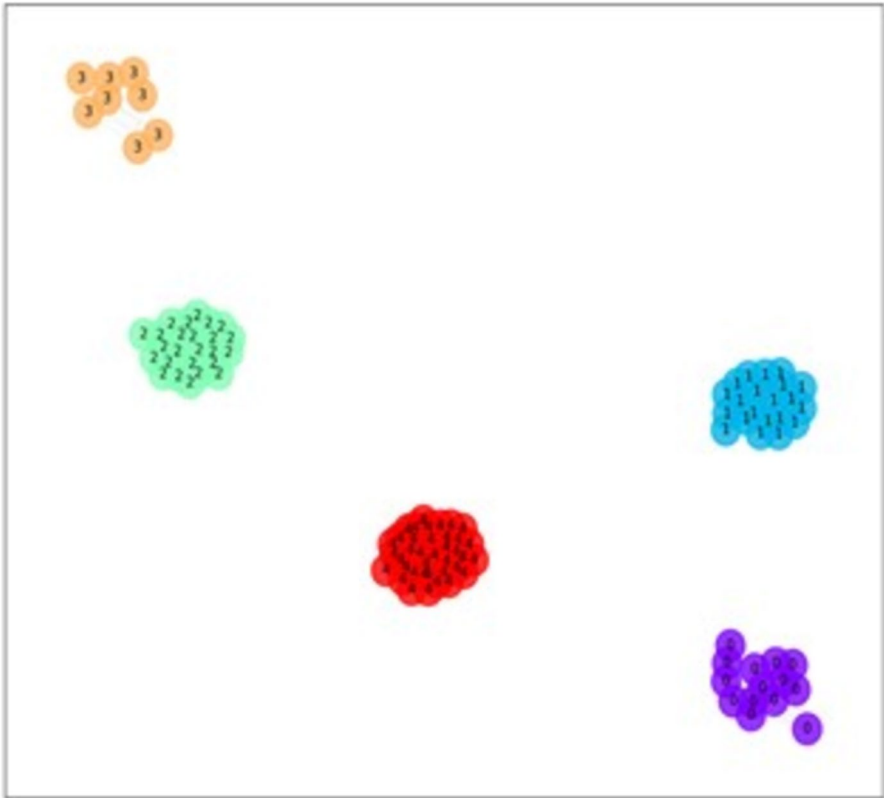


Fig 4 OPM Mission Map of Dominant Topics. Note. This represents the five clusters generated. Own elaboration.

frequently portray OPMs as fundamentally centered on providing education, focused on supporting students. Students are the central beneficiaries of OPM services, with universities and other educational institutions as critical stakeholders. The frequent appearance of “institution” further highlights the importance of partnerships for OPM’s success. This suggests that student-centric support and educational enhancement are prominent communicated values in the corpus, aligning with their role as service providers to both learners and institutions.

Terms such as “online”, “platform”, “technology”, and “digital” emphasize the technological infrastructure that underpins the OPM industry to create scalable, accessible, and effective learning solutions. This reinforces the definition of OPMs as technologically driven entities that integrate digital tools into the education landscape. The word cloud also emphasizes improving education access and fostering student success, as evidenced by the frequent occurrence of terms directly associated with educational inclusion and achievement, such as “help”, “provide”, “access”, “quality”, and “improve”. The prominence of these words visually signals their centrality to OPMs’ stated missions, indicating that these organisations not only deliver

content but actively position themselves as enablers of opportunity and achievement for learners. This points to a mission-oriented approach where OPMs are dedicated to creating opportunities for students to engage with a high-quality education. The mission statements convey a value proposition aligned with the academic and social mission of HEI to address barriers to education, such as cost, mobility, geography, or lack of infrastructure, presenting such collaborations as legitimate and aligned with higher education's social mission.

The terms “partner”, “service” and “support” reflect the cooperative nature of OPMs, which work closely with HEI to deliver online programs. In the analyzed statements, collaboration is *frequently described as central* to partnership narratives. Terms like “skills”, “lifelong”, and “professional” highlight the role of OPMs in preparing students for the workforce and supporting ongoing skill development. By focusing on these areas, the mission statements indicate that the OPMs align with the growing demand for education that equips learners with practical and career-oriented skills. Finally, the frequent appearance of words such as “innovation”, “transform”, and “technology” suggests that the mission statements seek to position OPMs as strategic partners to drive change within the education sector. These terms reflect a commitment to reimagining traditional education models through innovative approaches that leverage technology to meet the evolving needs of students and institutions.

In summary, the mission statements in this corpus portray *OPMs* as educational service providers that collaborate with universities to design, deliver, and support online learning programs. They leverage technology platforms to expand access to quality higher education, enhance student experience, and foster skill development through digital means. By partnering with institutions, universities, and companies in their mission to teach, OPMs aim to empower lifelong learners through innovative solutions beyond traditional education and support, and help students improve their skills through digital experience.

Figure 3 presents a visualization of word embeddings generated from the corpus of mission statements. This visualization not only groups semantically related terms but also reinforces the centrality of learner-focused concepts within OPM narratives. The spatial separation of “platform” from the main educational cluster underscores its distinct role as a technological enabler, which in turn connects directly to the partnership and scalability themes developed in the cluster analysis. This map shows that words more closely related in meaning or context appear closer together, while unrelated terms are spaced farther apart. For instance, terms like “learning”, “educational”, and “program” appear in proximity, reflecting their frequent co-occurrence and semantic alignment. However, the positioning of “platform” slightly apart from other clusters indicates its unique role in OPM mission statements, emphasizing the technological foundation of these services as distinct from the educational and institutional aspects. Other words, such as “empower” and “education”, are situated near core terms like “mission”, reinforcing the OPMs' focus on their mission to empower students and institutions through digital education. In sum, this map supports the definition of OPMs as organizations that operate at the intersection of education and technology, often with a clear mission to transform, empower, and expand access to learning opportunities.

While the word cloud provides a high-level view of commonly used terms, the following cluster analysis explores how these terms are embedded in broader themes.

Topic Clusters from LDA

Figure 4 presents a cluster map of dominant topics linking OPM mission statements. This cluster map provides a visual bridge to the thematic interpretations that follow. The density and proximity of keywords within each cluster reveal the intensity with which certain themes are repeated across OPM mission statements. This spatial arrangement also supports the interpretive link between clusters and the strategic positioning of OPMs, showing, for example, how terms related to institutional reform appear tightly bound to digital and platform-oriented vocabulary, highlighting the integrated nature of pedagogical and technological framing.

The different clusters represent a variety of OPM mission statement emphases:

- *Cluster 0—Educational Transformation*: characterized by terms like “learning” (0.026), “student” (0.025), “system”, “program”, “transform”, emphasizing improving learning systems and student support. This theme is exemplified in mission statements such as Kipin’s: “*Kipin is an IoT that has been developed for serving school digitalization needs through one digital library device...*” and NewCampus’s: “*NewCampus grows leaders who scale themselves. We equip professionals with the mindset and capabilities to take on leadership in fast-changing, diverse environments.*” These reflect OPMs’ emphasis on redefining learning through institutional and technological transformation.
- *Cluster 1—Empowering Learners*: characterized by terms such as “education” (0.014), “learner” (0.012), “help”, “skill”, “potential”, and “digital”, highlighting initiatives aimed at enhancing learners’ skills, unlocking potential, and providing digital solutions and opportunities to improve people’s lives. This orientation appears in missions like Southern New Hampshire University’s: “*Southern New Hampshire University transforms the lives of learners... by relentlessly challenging the status quo and providing the best support in higher education,*” and Everspring’s: “*Everspring creates digital solutions that help universities deliver and sustain high-quality online education that expands access and delivers extraordinary outcomes.*”
- *Cluster 2—Online Learning*: identified by terms like “program” (0.017), “student” (0.015), “online”, “mission”, “help”, and “platform”, emphasizing the role of online courses and platforms, student-centered missions, supportive services, and collaborative partnerships. For example, Elsmere Education declares: “*EEl partners with colleges and universities to design, deliver, and sustain high-quality online degree programs,*” while Zovio states: “*Zovio is an education technology services company that partners with higher education institutions and employers to deliver innovative, personalized solutions.*”
- *Cluster 3—Professional and Online Education*: defined by terms such as “online” (0.020), “education” (0.015), “English”, “provide”, “professional”, and

“medical”, underscoring efforts to deliver professional training, enhance English communication skills, and offer specialized educational services online. Medvarsity’s mission reads: “*Medvarsity Online is Asia’s largest healthcare EdTech company with a vision to provide accessible and affordable education,*” while Topica Edtech Group describes itself as “*a leading online education provider in Southeast Asia, offering a range of courses and learning solutions.*”

- **Cluster 4—Accessible Global Education:** featuring terms like “learning” (0.031), “student” (0.027), “education”, “help”, “mission”, and “university”, highlighting commitments toward accessible education, supporting student learning through universities and companies, and contributing positively to global educational access. TeamLease EdTech’s mission includes: “*India’s leading learning solutions company providing technology-enabled academic services to universities and students,*” which showcases the aim of making education globally accessible through scalable infrastructure.

As seen above, Cluster 0’s mission statements focus on systemic educational transformation by improving learning experiences and emphasizing the support of students. The inclusion of “university” and “school” further suggests a focus on institutional structures within education, highlighting the role of these institutions in driving transformation. Overall, the mission implied here seems to be about reforming educational systems to better support students through innovative approaches to learning and institutional improvement, which strongly influences learner success and satisfaction (Sokro et al., 2024; Nunez et al., 2025). Cluster 1 emphasizes learner empowerment, developing skills, unlocking potential, and digital solutions. The mission implied here seems to be focused on empowering learners by providing them with the necessary skills, opportunities, and support to succeed in their educational and life pursuits. Cluster 2 emphasizes online learning platforms, partnerships, and student support through digital learning and services. Cluster 3 offers specialized online education in professional fields and focuses on specific disciplines and professional development. Cluster 4 combines a global mission with a focus on improving access to education, suggesting more access to education, possibly targeting underserved populations. These differences illustrate the diversity in OPM’s statements approach, from holistic learner development to institutional reform and specialized professional training.

Discussion

The empirical analysis of 106 global OPM mission statements using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) revealed five dominant thematic clusters: educational transformation, learner empowerment, online learning platforms, specialized professional education, and accessible global education. Across clusters, the most salient terms projected a consistent narrative around student support, educational innovation, technological integration, and institutional collaboration. While such themes appear closely aligned with higher education’s stated values, mission statements are also strategic communication tools. They present an aspirational vision that may not

correspond to actual practices, particularly given that OPM agreements are often confidential, long-term, and difficult to evaluate externally (Cheslock et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2024). As such, the positive language of these statements must be weighed against the opacity of service delivery, financial arrangements, and governance structures.

Cluster 0 frames OPMs as enhancers of the educational experience through improved student support and learning systems. This aligns with arguments that outsourcing certain functions can allow universities to focus on teaching while leveraging specialized expertise (Gupta et al., 2005; Ramani et al., 2022). Yet, as Cheslock et al. (2021) and Kim and Maloney (2020) caution, overreliance on external providers risks commodifying coursework, eroding institutional autonomy, and delivering student support that fails to meet expectations. The absence of measurable outcomes or accountability mechanisms in these mission statements raises concerns about whether these commitments are actually actionable.

Cluster 1 emphasizes learner empowerment through skill development, unlocking potential, and deploying digital solutions, reflecting broader imperatives for workforce readiness and lifelong learning (Darby & Lang, 2019; Wang & Li, 2023). However, empirical research shows that the success of such ambitions depends on institutional support structures, tailored pedagogical design, and students' digital readiness (Castro & Tumibay, 2021; García-Peñalvo, 2021). Without explicit discussion of students learning profiles, empowerment operationalization and outcomes assessments, these claims risk remaining performative and, in some cases, even misleading, by generating expectations that are not realistic.

Cluster 2 centers on partnerships and integrated online platforms, which are core to the OPM business model (Cheslock et al., 2021). Technology-enabled all-around services can improve student outcomes (Hall & Dudley, 2019; Stickney et al., 2019), yet the literature highlights the hazards of long-term revenue-sharing contracts and the difficulty of exiting these partnerships even if expected goals are unmet (Maloney & Kim, 2019; Carroll-Glover, 2024). Mission statements' collaborative rhetoric omits these structural constraints, leaving prospective partners without a clear sense of risk exposure.

Cluster 3 promotes professional and discipline-specific online education, resonating with the growing demand for programs that deliver industry-relevant skills and credentials (Salama & Hinton, 2023; Raj et al., 2024). While online platforms can scale such offerings to meet labor market needs (Gilmore & Nguyen, 2023), contract opacity makes it difficult to verify whether OPMs adapt curricula to disciplinary pedagogies or prioritize marketable, high-volume programs in a mass production one-fits-all model. The growing emphasis on micro- and nano-credentials within OPM-facilitated programs introduces additional risks related to the fragmentation, compartmentalization, and decontextualization of knowledge. While such credentials can offer targeted, just-in-time learning opportunities, their highly technical and narrowly specialized focus may render them overly transient in relevance, quickly outdated in dynamic labor markets, and disconnected from the broader intellectual and civic purposes of higher education. This over-specialization can erode the university's traditional mission to cultivate integrative, critical, and long-lasting skills that endure beyond immediate occupational demands (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022).

Moreover, when credential design is driven primarily by short-term market trends rather than holistic curricular coherence, it risks undermining the formative role of higher education as a site for developing adaptable knowledge frameworks and reflective capacities (Ralston, 2021).

Cluster 4's mission statements position OPMs as agents of global inclusion, committed to expanding educational opportunities for underserved and geographically remote populations. This reflects higher education's social mission (Wang & Li, 2023) and echoes broader narratives of access and equity. However, studies demonstrate that students in low-resource contexts often face infrastructural and digital literacy barriers that hinder participation (Khan et al., 2023; Kristiana et al., 2023). Without clear evidence that OPMs invest in overcoming these systemic challenges, such commitments may overpromise and underdeliver.

These thematic clusters must also be interpreted in light of growing empirical evidence that online program expansion, particularly when mediated by commercial actors, does not consistently yield positive student outcomes. Smith et al. (2024) show that while online education has expanded access, especially for Black and low-income students, it is also associated with lower retention and graduation rates across both non-profit and for-profit sectors, as well as less favorable student loan repayment outcomes. They describe this phenomenon as *predatory inclusion*, in which provision of access to historically underserved populations is coupled with increased risks and weaker outcomes compared to similar students of in-person programs. In the context of OPMs, whose mission statements frequently highlight empowerment and access, these findings raise questions about the gap between promotional narratives and actual performance. This is especially concerning given the opaqueness of OPM contracts and the lack of public accountability for educational results (Cheslock et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2024).

When framed against these critiques, the aspirational language observed in our clusters -whether in student support (Cluster 0), empowerment (Cluster 1), global inclusion (Cluster 4), or professional development (Cluster 3)- risks functioning as a legitimacy shield for practices that may exacerbate inequities in student success. Without transparent data on retention, completion, and post-graduation outcomes, higher education leaders cannot verify whether OPM-led initiatives fulfill their stated commitments or reproduce the very disparities they claim to address. As Smith et al. (2024) caution, the involvement of for-profit entities in the delivery of online programs may contribute directly to these problematic patterns. Taken together, these clusters show that OPMs strategically frame their missions to mirror the priorities of HEIs while obscuring contentious issues such as cost structures, governance safeguards, and quality assurance.

A notable pattern across all mission statements is the systematic absence of operational cost information. By contrast, references to governance and quality do appear, but in highly ceremonial, rhetoric terms. Such formulations signal legitimacy without specifying mechanisms that would matter for institutional oversight: faculty representation in decision rights; audit and data-sharing provisions; clear escalation paths; performance guarantees; alignment with named QA frameworks (e.g., program-level accreditation standards, externally benchmarked rubrics); or pre-agreed outcome targets (retention, completion, debt-to-earnings, time-to-degree).

The resulting asymmetry creates a misalignment with core university missions of stewardship, shared governance, and demonstrable educational quality. In practical terms, these statements function as promotional commitments rather than operational contracts, making it difficult for institutions to assess risk, enforce accountability, or verify continuous improvement.

This selective representation functions as a legitimacy-building mechanism (Fumasoli et al., 2020; Gallagher & Palmer, 2020), aligning rhetorically with academic values but omitting details essential for informed partnership decisions. The absence of references to academic freedom, faculty governance, and transparent performance metrics reinforces concerns that mission statements serve a promotional rather than an evaluative purpose (Gimbert, 2011; Dumanig & Symaco, 2020).

Our findings underscore that OPM mission statements offer a polished narrative that can sidestep the contractual realities of these partnerships. This selective framing parallels established marketing strategies in the higher education sector, where aspirational narratives are deployed to differentiate services in a competitive market (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Hartley & Morpew, 2008). By foregrounding emotive themes such as empowerment and inclusion while omitting potential liabilities, OPMs employ techniques akin to commercial brand management, positioning themselves as essential partners for institutional transformation.

Given the confidential nature of many agreements, HEIs should treat such narratives as starting points, and not evidence, when assessing potential partners. The absence of explicit references to costs and enrolment metrics in OPM mission statements might reflect a performative alignment with the values of key stakeholders, such as academics and HEI leaders (Gumport, 2000; Wekullo, 2017; Gallagher and Palmer, 2020; Simpson, 2023). Performative alignment (Bromley & Powell, 2012) consists of organizations adopting the rhetoric, symbols, and forms associated with valued institutional norms to secure legitimacy, while substantive alignment with these norms remains partial or absent. In the OPM context, such alignment may manifest in the selective invocation of equity, access, or innovation to appeal to higher education leaders, without corresponding commitments in contractual terms or operational metrics.

For institutions, accepting performative alignment at face value risks entering partnerships that subtly reshape their priorities toward market responsiveness at the expense of scholarly integrity and academic mission (Newfield, 2016). When values are mirrored rhetorically but not operationalized in practice, the result can be mission drift, overreliance on external providers, and diminished capacity for internally driven innovation.

Due diligence should include independent verification of prior performance, including retention, graduation, and satisfaction metrics (Cheslock et al., 2021; Ramani et al., 2022); clear contractual definitions of services, exit clauses, and governance oversight (Carroll-Glover, 2024; Maloney & Kim, 2019), ensuring that the proposed educational model fits both the student profile and the institution's values, thereby avoiding a one-size-fits-all solution that may dilute instructional quality (Coates, 2020; Morris et al., 2020), and guaranteeing that instructional design reflects disciplinary needs and includes faculty in curriculum decisions (Hall & Dudley, 2019).

By critically interrogating both the promises and the silences in OPM mission statements, higher education leaders can better safeguard institutional autonomy, align partnerships with their educational mission, and protect student outcomes in a rapidly evolving digital marketplace. As Hall and Dudley (2019) emphasize, the balance between support and autonomy in OPM partnerships is delicate: while access to external capital, marketing expertise, and technological infrastructure can accelerate program growth, these benefits often come with contractual provisions that shift decision-making power away from the institution. Such dependencies can extend beyond operational logistics to influence curriculum design, enrollment targets, and even pedagogical approaches, embedding the partner's commercial priorities into the institution's academic core. Without explicit safeguards, such as faculty governance rights over course content, transparent performance metrics, and the ability to adapt or terminate agreements, these partnerships risk constraining an institution's strategic freedom and redefining its mission primarily around market imperatives. Preserving autonomy therefore requires structuring support in ways that enhance internal capacity rather than substitute for it, ensuring that OPM engagement remains a tool for mission fulfillment.

Large-scale meta-analyses consistently demonstrate that the learning outcomes of online education are highly variable and contingent on delivery modality, instructional design, and contextual factors. Bernard et al. (2004), in a synthesis of 232 studies and 688 independent outcomes, found overall effect sizes close to zero for achievement, attitudes, and retention, with synchronous formats tending to underperform relative to classroom instruction, while asynchronous formats often fared better—albeit with substantial heterogeneity in both.

The U.S. Department of Education's comprehensive review (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Baki, & Jones, 2010) similarly concluded that, on average, online learning produced modestly better outcomes than face-to-face instruction, with the strongest gains occurring in blended learning contexts. Extending this line of inquiry, Means et al. (2013) reported a small but significant performance advantage for online learning, particularly in blended models, while cautioning that these effects may be driven by ancillary variables such as increased learning time, richer instructional resources, and more frequent learner interactions. Zhao et al. (2005) likewise found a negligible overall difference ($d = +0.10$) between online education and classroom instruction, with blended approaches (60–80% online) showing the most positive effects. More recently, Schmid et al. (2023) confirmed that online learning performs at least as well as traditional delivery, and that blended or flipped formats significantly outperform in-person instruction. Taken together, these findings indicate that the pedagogical effectiveness often implied in OPM mission statements cannot be assumed categorically; rather, it depends on the alignment of modality, design, and learner needs, and may not materialize in the absence of deliberate, well-resourced instructional strategies.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study reveals that OPM firms strategically communicate values aligned superficially with those of HEIs, emphasizing educational innovation, technological integration, and collaboration, but often omitting critical operational details such as

financial transparency and academic governance. These strategic narratives underscore potential tensions between aspirational commitments and practical realities in OPM partnerships.

Higher education leaders must approach OPM collaborations with caution, conducting thorough assessments of partner credibility and aligning partnership objectives explicitly with institutional academic values. Clearly defined contractual safeguards, including robust faculty engagement and practical exit clauses, are essential to preserving institutional autonomy and academic quality. Future research should critically examine actual outcomes versus communicated missions to identify best practices for successful and genuinely aligned OPM partnerships.

Therefore, this study contributes to understanding how OPMs use mission statements as strategic communication tools, signaling alignment with academic values while often omitting references to governance, transparency, or cost structures. These narratives help OPMs gain legitimacy in a competitive landscape. Future research should compare these narratives to actual outcomes in OPM-HEI partnerships, exploring how alignment affects institutional strategy, student success, and governance dynamics.

This study, while comprehensive, has certain limitations. First, our dataset does not capture the full breadth of the OPM industry. There is no single, universally accepted definition of OPMs, which may have excluded firms operating under similar models. Second, the mission statements were collected at a single point in time and may not reflect strategic shifts or updated communications. Future longitudinal research should consider how these statements evolve. Third, the analysis utilized mission statements as strategic narratives, which may not fully capture the operational realities of OPM firms. Furthermore, the use of Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) requires presetting topic numbers, potentially constraining thematic nuance. Future research could enhance these findings through comparative case studies assessing actual partnership outcomes against stated missions. Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine evolving OPM strategic narratives in response to changing market conditions or policy shifts. Exploring the emerging impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) on HEI-OPM dynamics offers another promising avenue to understand further disruptions in digital education partnerships.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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