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In-House *or hybrid* vs Purpose-Built Edtech Platforms: Pros and Cons

Create Learning Journeys That Last a Lifetime

Manage, market and sell courses in a way students love.

Introduction

In-House, Hybrid or Purpose-Built Platforms: Pros and Cons

The “build versus buy” debate is more relevant than ever in higher education. Budget constraints, rising student expectations, and increasingly complex digital environments make this a strategic, not just technical, decision. While in-house development can offer full control, it also demands significant investment in time, talent, and long-term maintenance.

Cloud-based platforms offer a compelling alternative. Modern SaaS solutions are not only scalable and cost-effective, they are built to adapt. With configurable workflows, regular updates, and enterprise-grade security, they allow institutions to modernise without reinventing the wheel.

This shift is particularly important for IT leaders. Integrating new tools with legacy systems, ensuring data compliance, and protecting student records from rising cybersecurity threats are now core priorities. Off-the-shelf platforms such as Full Fabric are designed with these needs in mind. They offer secure, API-driven integration, GDPR-compliant data management, and robust support from day one.

Full Fabric integrates with existing systems through open APIs. It supports role-based access control and enables GDPR-compliant workflows as standard.

Choosing the right approach is about more than functionality. It is about sustainability, agility, and the ability to future-proof your institution. The key question is not just “what do we need today?” but “what will we need tomorrow, and who is best equipped to deliver it?”

Build or Buy? What You Should Think About First

In-House Development: More Control, Higher Cost

Advantages:

Full control and customisation.
An in-house system can be tailored to your institution's exact specifications. From user journeys to reporting models, every detail is yours to define. However, this level of control demands rigorous project management. Without clear scope and collaboration, risks such as feature creep and delayed delivery are common.

Ownership of code and infrastructure.
Owning your code base provides theoretical flexibility and potential long-term savings. But that also means owning every update, bug fix, and compliance requirement that comes with it. These responsibilities grow over time and require dedicated, specialised resources.

Tighter alignment with existing systems.
Internal teams may have deeper knowledge of your current infrastructure, allowing tighter integrations. That said, these integrations still require extensive planning, documentation, and maintenance, especially as legacy systems evolve or are phased out.

Drawbacks:

High risk of failure.
Institution-led software projects are often at risk of missing deadlines, exceeding budgets, or falling short of their goals. Complex stakeholder needs, limited internal capacity, and unclear success criteria can easily derail the timeline.

Limited technical specialism.
While institutional IT teams are highly capable, they are rarely structured like product development teams. Skill gaps in areas such as user experience, mobile design, or advanced analytics can limit what your team can build and support effectively.

In-House Development: More Control, Higher Cost

Drawbacks:

Ongoing security and compliance burden.
From GDPR to user access permissions, compliance cannot be an afterthought. Maintaining secure, compliant infrastructure is a full-time responsibility. Without dedicated teams and regular audits, your institution may face growing risk exposure over time.

Support and knowledge management challenges.
When key developers leave, undocumented decisions leave gaps that are difficult to recover from. Without consistent documentation and a clear maintenance roadmap, long-term sustainability becomes fragile.

Building software is not a one-off project. It’s an ongoing commitment that requires a multi-disciplinary team and institutional buy-in for the long haul.

Generic Systems with Custom Development: The Hybrid Reality

For many institutions, the journey does not begin with a fully in-house system or a purpose-built solution. It begins with a generic platform. These systems are often selected for their perceived flexibility and widespread use. But to make them fit the specific needs of higher education, institutions usually rely on consultants or in-house teams to customise, extend, and adapt them.

This hybrid model is common across the sector. However, it often results in complexity, dependency, and rising costs that become harder to manage over time.

Generic Systems with Custom Development: The Hybrid Reality

Advantages:

Wider procurement acceptance.
Generic platforms often meet centralised procurement criteria and may already be used elsewhere within the institution.

Familiar vendor relationships.
Institutions may already have existing contracts, licences, or integrations with the vendor, which can reduce the initial barrier to adoption.

Customisation potential through external support.
With the right consultants or internal teams, these platforms can be adapted to meet some sector-specific requirements.

Perception of flexibility.
The promise of open-ended customisation can appear to offer long-term adaptability, especially for institutions with unique internal structures.

Drawbacks:

Heavy reliance on external consultants.
Changes to functionality, design, or integrations often require vendor engagement or third-party support. This adds cost, delays, and complexity.

Ongoing maintenance burden.
Customisations are rarely supported natively. Institutions must maintain their own documentation, test every update, and resolve conflicts manually.

Fragmented student and staff experiences.
Because these systems were not designed for higher education, workflows and interfaces can feel disconnected or unintuitive.

Unpredictable total cost.
Customisation projects often overrun. What seems affordable at first can turn into a high-cost solution, especially when multiple vendors are involved.

Risk of internal skill dependency.
Over time, institutions may become reliant on individual staff or contractors who hold essential knowledge, making continuity difficult.

Generic platforms can work, but they are rarely a perfect fit. Institutions often find themselves building workarounds on top of tools that were never designed for higher education. This creates operational friction and long-term cost.

Purpose-Built Platforms: Designed for Higher Education from Day One

Not all software is created equal. Generic off-the-shelf tools might cover the basics, but they often lack the depth, flexibility, and support that higher education institutions need. In many cases, IT leaders still need to step in to build workarounds or develop add-ons to meet sector-specific needs.

Fortunately, there is another option. Purpose-built platforms are designed from the ground up to support recruitment, admissions, and the full student lifecycle.

These platforms combine the speed and efficiency of SaaS with deep sector knowledge and configuration options that match your institutional reality. Full Fabric is the only end-to-end commerce platform built for higher education. Every part of our product is designed with institutional complexity, student expectations, and compliance requirements in mind.

Purpose-Built Platforms: Designed for Higher Education from Day One

Advantages:

Built for the way institutions actually work.
Purpose-built platforms understand the nuances of higher education. From applicant workflows and programme structures to compliance and data security, they are designed to reflect your challenges. There is no need to retrofit, develop additional features or compromise your current infrastructure.

Faster implementation with meaningful outcomes.
Unlike generic systems, a platform like Full Fabric already speaks your language. This means less time spent translating internal processes and more time delivering value. Institutions typically launch within 8 to 12 weeks and begin seeing improvements immediately.

Designed for continuous improvement.
At Full Fabric, we invest more than 20,000 hours every year into platform development. This includes usability improvements, accessibility updates, sector-specific features, and regular security enhancements. You benefit from a product that constantly evolves to meet your changing needs.

Security, compliance, and trust built in.
Higher education operates in a complex regulatory environment. Our platform is designed with GDPR at its core. It supports detailed audit trails, permission-based access, and undergoes regular penetration testing. Your data remains secure, visible, and fully under your control.

Integrates with your ecosystem.
Purpose-built does not mean restrictive. Full Fabric integrates with your existing tools through open APIs. This includes CRM, student information systems, payment gateways, learning platforms, and communication tools. Our implementation team works alongside your IT department to ensure seamless and future-ready connectivity.

Strategic partnership, not just software.
Our work does not stop at go-live. With a customer satisfaction score above 98%, our team becomes an extension of yours. From training to ongoing optimisation, we are here to support long-term success and institutional growth.

Purpose-Built Platforms: Designed for Higher Education from Day One

Considerations:

Configuration still requires careful planning.
Even the best-designed platform needs thoughtful setup. We guide you through the process step by step, from workflow mapping to team training and success planning.

Data governance needs internal clarity.
Full Fabric gives you complete control over your data. This includes clear access controls, version history, and auditability. However, effective governance requires coordination across departments, especially when working with sensitive or complex data sets.

Purpose-built does not mean inflexible. It means you start with a platform that already understands your processes and evolves with you as your needs change.

The True Scale of In-House and Hybrid Development

Building a comprehensive platform from scratch may sound like the ideal way to control every feature, but the reality is far more complex. For most institutions, developing and maintaining a fully integrated, secure, and user-friendly system demands far more than internal IT teams can realistically support.

Many universities try to bridge this gap with a hybrid approach, starting with generic systems and relying on consultants or internal development to customise them. While this can appear to be a middle ground, it often introduces the same complexity and long-term costs as a fully in-house build.

It's not just a project. It's a long-term commitment.

Creating an in-house platform or building on top of a generic system means managing every stage of development. This includes defining the scope, designing the experience, writing and testing the code, setting up infrastructure, and managing security and compliance. It also means providing ongoing support, maintaining documentation, and continuously improving functionality.

Most institutions underestimate the full cost of this effort. What begins as a one-year project often becomes a multi-year commitment, with growing demands on people, budget, and infrastructure.

Full Fabric invests more than 20,000 hours every year into platform development, security, and innovation. Replicating that investment internally would require a full-time, cross-functional product team working year-round.

The team you would need

A successful software product is never built by developers alone. To maintain quality, security, and institutional relevance, you would need:

- **Business analysts** to gather requirements and translate them into functional designs.
- **UX and UI designers** to ensure the experience is intuitive and meets accessibility standards.
- **Front-end and back-end developers** with expertise in responsive, secure, and scalable architecture.
- **Quality assurance** and testing professionals to validate each release and catch issues early.
- **Database administrators** to manage student data securely and efficiently.
- **DevOps or infrastructure engineers** to handle deployments, uptime, and disaster recovery.
- **Technical writers** to produce documentation for users and administrators.
- **A product manager** to coordinate the roadmap, timelines, and team priorities.

The team you would need

Hiring or outsourcing, managing, and retaining this level of talent is a substantial undertaking, even for large institutions. And once the system is live, the work does not stop. Regular updates, feature requests, security fixes, and user support become part of the daily reality.

Software is never “done.” It’s a living system that must keep pace with students, staff, and the evolving learning models.

Maintenance and Support: The Often Overlooked Burden

Creating software is just the beginning. Once your system is live, the real work begins. Ongoing maintenance, support, and optimisation are essential to keep the platform secure, compliant, and aligned with the evolving needs of students and staff.

Institutions are not static. Your platform cannot be either.

Higher education environments are constantly changing. New programmes launch. Admissions criteria shift. Regulations evolve. Student expectations grow. A platform that works today will need to adapt tomorrow. Without a structured plan and the resources to match, your software can quickly fall behind.

Support is a full-time responsibility.

Students and staff depend on your platform. That means someone must always be available to answer questions, solve issues, and deliver training. As your usage grows, so do the demands on your support team.

- **Users expect fast**, friendly, and knowledgeable assistance.
- **Bugs must be resolved** quickly and accurately.
- **New staff** need onboarding and training.
- **System updates and patches** must be applied without disrupting operations.
- **Documentation** must stay current as the platform evolves.

Maintenance and Support: The Often Overlooked Burden

At Full Fabric, our customer success team responds to most requests within two working hours. We maintain a 98 percent satisfaction rating across our support channels.

Delivering this level of service internally requires dedicated staff, specialised tools, and a culture of continuous improvement. Without it, frustrations rise, confidence erodes, and adoption drops.

Knowledge loss is a hidden risk.

In-house or hybrid systems often rely heavily on a small group of developers or external consultants. When one of them leaves, they take their knowledge with them. Without clear documentation, structured handovers, and shared responsibility, progress slows. In some cases, institutions are left with systems they no longer know how to support.

Modern SaaS platforms solve this problem by embedding best practices, documentation, and training into every engagement. At Full Fabric, every implementation includes an onboarding programme, a support knowledge base, and structured release notes to ensure your team is never left behind.

The more knowledge that lives in your platform, the less you have to rely on individual people to keep things running.

Cost, Value, and Long-Term Sustainability

Cost is often the first question when comparing in-house development with a SaaS platform. But short-term savings can lead to long-term costs. Hidden complexity, ongoing maintenance, and the need for continuous updates all take their toll.

In-house development rarely stays within budget.

Building a platform from scratch may appear cost-effective at the planning stage. However, most projects exceed initial estimates. Common issues include:

- **Scope creep** as stakeholder needs evolve.
- **Delays** caused by limited capacity or changing priorities.
- **Technical debt** created by short-term fixes.
- **Maintenance costs** that grow year by year.
- **Missed opportunities** to benefit from external innovation.

> **Many institutions underestimate the cost of not improving. Delayed enrolments, poor applicant experiences, and missed insights can have a much higher financial and reputational impact over time.**

SaaS platforms offer a different kind of value.

While you pay a regular licence fee, SaaS platforms like Full Fabric deliver continuous value. You benefit from a platform that is always improving, backed by expert support, and designed to adapt with you.

What you are really investing in is:

- **Faster time** to impact.
- **Reduced administrative** burden.
- **Greater visibility** and control.
- **Built-in compliance** and security.
- **A better experience** for students and staff.
- **A strategic partner** who understands your goals.

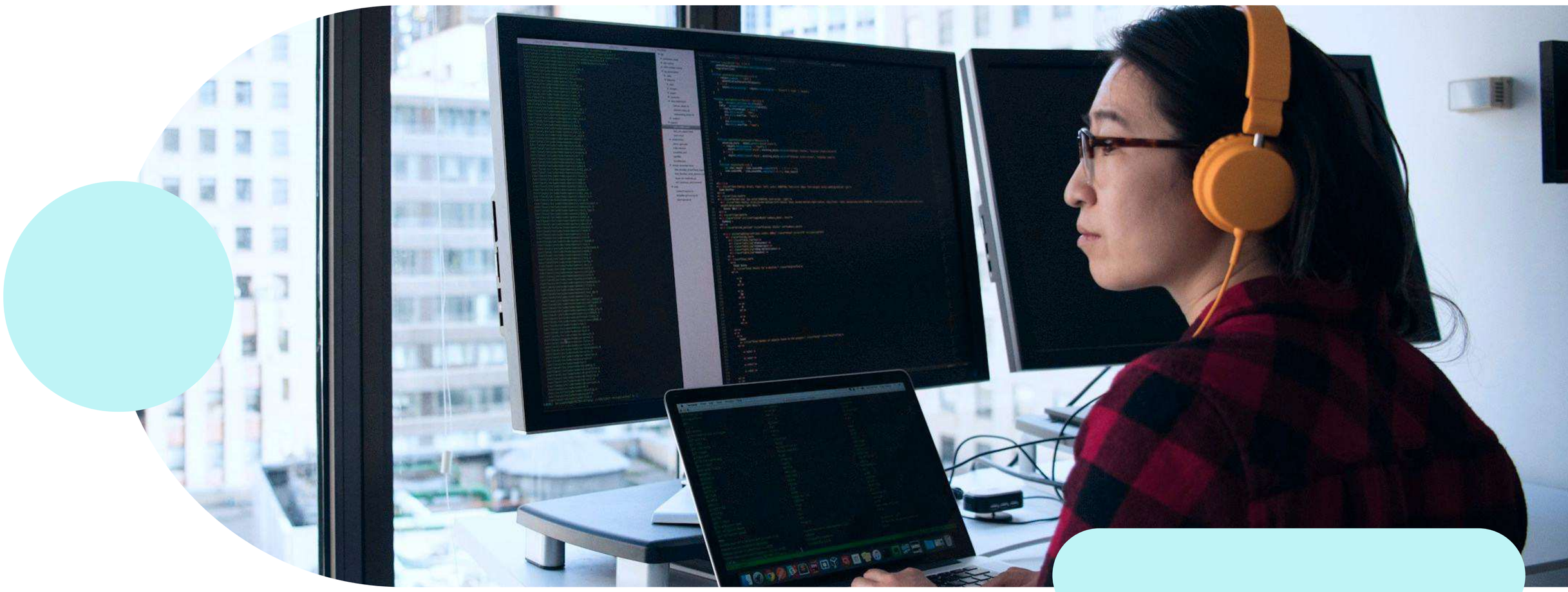
At Full Fabric, we don't just offer software. We offer a way forward. Our team works closely with institutions to understand their needs, map out tailored solutions, and support them long after implementation.

Modernising does not mean spending more. It means investing in tools that pay dividends through efficiency, growth, and satisfaction.

In summary

In-house development can offer control, but it requires a long-term operational and financial commitment that few institutions can sustain. A purpose-built platform gives you flexibility, support, and strategic value without the hidden costs.

Choosing the right approach is not just about today’s budget. It's about tomorrow’s readiness.



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