

Towards a Model for Supporting Distance Education Lecturers in the Design and Development of Online Learning Courses

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Abstract

The University of South Africa (UNISA), South Africa's largest provider of open distance e-learning (ODEL), is transitioning from a correspondence-based model to a fully digital student learning environment by 2030. While collaborative course development teams have provided various forms of support during this shift, there has been limited systematic research into how lecturers themselves perceive this support. This exploratory qualitative study gathered insights from UNISA lecturers through focus group interviews to better understand their experiences and to propose a model for ODeL lecturer support in online course development. Findings indicate that while collaborative teams and peer networks play a critical role, institutional challenges—including inconsistent service, lack of training customisation, and insufficient planning—impede the process. The resulting support model integrates these perspectives and offers a scalable, quality-enhancing framework for institutions engaged in distance education transformation.

Keywords: lecturer support model; lecturer support; online course development; collaborative course design; instructional design

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Introduction

The global expansion of e-learning, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the need for educators to design and develop online courses or modules effectively. In 2019, over 23 million students were enrolled in distance education across 12 countries, including South Africa (Qayyum and Zawacki-Richter, 2019). This number increased to approximately 220 million by 2021 (UNESCO, 2023). At the University of South Africa (UNISA), the largest distance learning provider in Africa, this demand has catalysed a strategic shift towards a fully digital open distance e-learning (ODeL) model. UNISA's 2030 Strategy prioritises the transformation of qualifications and modules to support an integrated digital learning environment transition, which requires significant lecturer support in course design, development, and delivery—support that must be collaborative, contextually responsive, and pedagogically sound (UNISA n.d.). Although multiple support mechanisms exist at UNISA, there is limited empirical evidence capturing lecturers' own perspectives on their adequacy. This article presents the findings of a study that explored these experiences to propose an institutional support model. Following a contextual background and literature review, the article outlines the research design, discusses key findings, and concludes with a proposed model for lecturer support in digital course development.

This article examines the design and development of online teaching units—referred to as “modules” at the University of South Africa (UNISA), akin to individual courses in other higher education contexts.

Background to the Study

Historically, UNISA has been at the forefront of distance education, gradually integrating online modes of delivery over the years. Key milestones include the adoption of fully online learning platforms and the development of digital resources, paving the way for the current strategic shift outlined in UNISA's 2030 Strategy (UNISA n.d.). This shift towards digitalisation requires transforming qualifications and modules (i.e., courses within qualifications) to support an integrated digital learning environment, ensuring that students will engage in the necessary learning experiences to achieve educational outcomes. To this end, UNISA's Tuition Policy advocates a “team” approach to curriculum and learning design, involving experts from various fields collaborating in a structured, step-by-step process. Given the complexities of digital learning technologies, the concerted efforts of these specialist teams are essential for advancing UNISA's transformation agenda.

UNISA's Framework for the Implementation of a Team Approach to Curriculum and Learning Development (FTA), which was conceptualised for curriculum and module development, incorporates the team approach and is aligned with UNISA's Tuition Policy and other policies. The FTA specifies systematic guidelines, subdivided into four

steps: curriculum design, learning design, learning development, and module site production. Key role-players include Education Consultants (ECs) of the Directorate of Curriculum Development and Transformation (DCDT), responsible lecturers, technology and student support representatives, relevant industry stakeholders, external authors where applicable, critical readers (peer reviewers), language services for editorial work, graphic artists, electronic originators, and the team supporting lecturers with the use of the learning management system (LMS). Academic departments may elect either a one-year or two-year development period. In addition to these support staff, who are generally housed in separate departments, UNISA provides various support measures, such as training programmes, access to technology, and ongoing technical support, to assist lecturers with the transition to online learning.

Research Problem

Despite the availability of various lecturer support measures at UNISA, no specific research has been done on how these lecturers perceive the support they receive and its overall effectiveness. The collaborative approach to course or module development at UNISA involves multiple support departments and diverse stakeholders, which may lead to inconsistencies in the quality of support and insufficient accommodation of individual needs. More information on lecturers' views in this regard can inform efforts to enhance support mechanisms, potentially leading to improved competence in module design and development. This, in turn, can directly impact student outcomes and the institution's overall success, since research indicates that effective module design and development are crucial to student achievement (e.g. Martin et al. 2021; Smallwood-Ramos 2023).

In this context, a group of education consultants at the university initiated a small-scale, qualitative research study to explore UNISA lecturers' perspectives on the support they receive during module design and development, with a few specific objectives.

Study Objectives and Research Questions

This study investigates how lecturers at UNISA perceive the support provided in the curriculum design and development process. The objectives of the study are to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the support structures, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of curriculum development and the overall quality of digital learning environments at UNISA; and to propose a tailored organisational model that effectively assists lecturers in navigating the complexities of designing and developing online modules.

The following main research question was formulated for the study:

- How do lecturers at an ODeL university perceive the level of support by the course development team in the development of qualifications and effective online courses?

The research sub-questions were as follows:

- What are the experiences of lecturers regarding the support they receive with qualification and course development by the university's curriculum design team?
- How do lecturers experience the (broader) institutional support they receive in preparing them to teach and assess online?
- What are lecturers' recommendations for more effective support?
- What are the main elements of a model to support lecturers in developing and facilitating effective online courses?

A literature review was undertaken to identify relevant support strategies in order to benchmark UNISA practices and possible models.

Literature Review on Lecturer Support for Online Course Development

A variety of measures to support lecturers in course design and development and online teaching at higher education institutions are reported on and recommended in literature. The most frequently highlighted measures are discussed below. The review encompassed articles on studies conducted both in Southern Africa and abroad.

Training

One of the most important requirements for lecturers' professional development in online course design and development is direct training in different forms, ranging from formal courses for lecturers (Redstone and Luo 2021; Hako et al. 2021) to more informal workshops, webinars, and asynchronous video-based training (Adera and Fisher 2019; Frass, Rucker and Washington 2017; Kumar, Ritzhaupt and Pedro 2022; Modise and Zawaki-Richter 2023). These diverse forms of training are frequently offered by an internal institutional unit that specialises in academic professional development, both abroad and in South Africa, as indicated by multiple authors (e.g. Leibowitz et al. 2014; Mahlaba and Mentz 2023; Mohlakoana 2019; Mohr and Shelton 2017). Such a unit may also involve staff members who provide instructional design support to lecturers. Alternatively, instructional designers may be located in a separate unit called a "teaching and learning centre" or something similar (Kumar et al. 2022). It is recommended that training should focus on both technological and online pedagogical skills (Hako et al. 2021; Isabirye and Makoe 2018), including discipline-specific pedagogical strategies (Armstrong 2022; Mohlakoana 2019).

Training programmes should be diverse to meet lecturers' varying needs (Adu and Okeke 2014; Saddik 2022). Frass et al. (2017), quoting Cicco (2013), suggest a staggered series of learning experiences for lecturers, starting with direct training in requisite skills, followed by simulation experiences, proceeding to teaching under the supervision of a mentor and, finally, teaching independently. Armstrong (2022, 182) likewise suggests that training programmes offered by the institutional professional development unit should be “clearly mapped and sequenced to specify progression [in] learning outcomes.”

Good Practice Guides

Standards and criteria for course design can form a basis for effective course development (McGee, Windes and Torres 2017; Du Preez 2023), as well as a repository of guidelines and examples. Good practice guides may be prepared by the institutional professional development unit or the teaching and learning centre and may take the form of asynchronous web-based resources (De Kock 2017; Ramsay, Robert and Sparrow 2019; Redstone and Luo 2021).

Collaborative Course Design and Development

Many higher education institutions follow a collaborative team-based approach to course design and development, in which a variety of specialists pool their expertise to produce an effective learning experience for students (Abdous 2020; Bennett and Albrecht 2021). Apart from lecturers, who provide the requisite subject-specific knowledge, teams often include academic peer reviewers, instructional designers, editors and multimedia designers (Lundstrom et al. 2022; Martin et al. 2019; Prinsloo 2021). A particularly important element of support within a team is the lecturer's collaboration with the instructional designer, who provides one-on-one instructional design assistance and advice (Adera and Fisher 2019; Pedro and Kumar 2020; Simelane-Mnisi 2023). As Ramsay et al. (2019, 63) point out: “Instructional design partnerships are indeed partnerships. Instructional designers do not seek to create pedagogical products for our faculty partners but rather to co-create and learn with them.” According to Adera and Fisher (2019), planning an online course with a collaborative instructional design partner should start at least six to twelve months before the implementation of the course.

Peer Support

A variety of peer support measures offered by academic departments to their staff are outlined in the literature. Peer coaching and peer mentoring, in particular, are regarded as key strategies in online course development and online teaching (Adnan 2017; Bloomberg 2022; Isabirye 2015; Richter and Idleman 2017). Some authors (e.g. Zhang, Liu and Wang 2017) equate the terms “coaching” and “mentoring,” but others distinguish between them, reasoning that coaching is mainly focused on the development of specific job-related skills, while mentoring is a “close, meaningful relationship” that is goal-oriented and involves “nurturing, advising, befriending and

instructing”; in this definition, mentoring subsumes coaching (Mullen and Klimaitis 2021, 21).

A strategy with a somewhat different focus is job shadowing, an experiential learning approach where a novice online teacher accompanies and observes a more experienced colleague at work (Martin et al. 2019). Peer reviews, which may be implemented as a formal or informal evaluation of a lecturer’s ongoing course development work or as observation followed by peer feedback, also serve as a support measure to enhance a lecturer’s skills in course development and teaching (Armstrong 2022; Ramsay et al. 2019).

Another frequently practised peer support measure is collegial learning communities, also known as communities of practice. The term “communities of practice,” introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), refers to a group of people who share a common interest, as well as a desire to learn from the group and to contribute to it. Academic learning communities of this nature are one of the most important mutual support strategies (Bloomberg 2022; Dlamini 2022; Ramsay et al. 2019; Saddik 2022). Communities of practice allow lecturers to develop a deeper understanding of design and teaching, to contribute their own good practices to the field, and ultimately, to create new knowledge (Bond and Lockee 2018). They also have an affective dimension and can provide emotional and motivational support, particularly when they involve online social networking (Isabirye 2015; Redstone and Luo 2021).

Autonomous Learning

The value of training provided by an institution and academic colleagues is enhanced for lecturers who take responsibility for their own learning, pursuing self-paced individual learning online and engaging in reflection on and self-assessment of their own practices (Armstrong 2022; McMahan 2021; Mahlaba and Mentz 2023).

Institutional Support

The support provided by an institution generally takes various forms. In a study by Martin et al. (2019), respondents indicated that administrative support, human resource support and technical support were their most fundamental needs; only once these needs were met, the need for pedagogical support became prominent. Under “administrative support,” respondents highlighted that sufficient time should be granted for course development. Under “human resource support,” respondents indicated that there should be adequate numbers of support staff to assist with activities like instructional design and multimedia production. Technical support involves direct technical assistance with digital tools, as well as the provision of the basic technological infrastructure (Kumar et al. 2022).

Another dimension of institutional support is the provision of direct incentives to lecturers for course design and development, including providing more favourable working conditions (Mohlakoana 2019). In a survey of 821 non-profit universities in

the USA, Herman (2013) found that 70% offered incentives for online course design and teaching, which included:

- recognition in the form of permanent appointments (for staff members on contract) and promotion;
- financial incentives;
- a reduction in workload to make course design work possible, for example, by assigning fewer courses to the lecturer to teach;
- technology rewards that lecturers would otherwise not receive, for example, laptops, phones, software applications or subscriptions; and
- the retention of intellectual property rights for the material lecturers had developed.

Finally, institutions are responsible for putting the necessary policies and procedures in place for online course development and teaching, and for promoting an organisational culture that favours these activities (Kumar et al. 2022; Modise and Zawaki-Richter 2023).

Theoretical Framework

Baran and Correia (2014) proposed a model for supporting online teachers in higher education that encompasses many of the support measures identified in the literature review. This model was regarded as a potentially useful theoretical framework for approaching the study. Baran and Correia's model is represented as a set of nested layers, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Representation of the Baran and Correia model (2014)

The outer layer of the model represents the academic institution as a whole. In this layer, the support provided involves recognising the work of online teachers and rewarding them for it and promoting a culture that supports online learning.

The second layer represents the “community” in which the teachers find themselves, in other words, the colleagues with whom they work directly, or wider communities of practice to which they may belong. Support in this layer includes peer learning groups, mentoring, and the observation and evaluation of teaching practice (Baran and Correia 2014).

The third layer of the model focuses on the support that teachers need to design and teach their online courses. This includes technological support, that is, “setting up technology structures and providing training” (Baran and Correia 2014, 98); pedagogical support, which involves training in online teaching skills; and design and development support, which involves assistance from “university-wide support centres” (Baran and Correia 2014, 98) that provide instructional designers, multimedia designers and other specialists.

Baran and Correia (2014) emphasise that the model is holistic, encompassing the various nested layers of support, as well as demonstrating their interconnectedness.

The approach of conceptualising various individual support mechanisms as part of a holistic, institution-wide set of measures aimed at supporting online development and typifying these measures as either organisational, community-based or teaching-directed guided the researchers' thinking in interpreting the results of the study, as well as delineating a tailored support model.

Research Methodology

Ethical Clearance

The study followed UNISA's ethical policy guidelines. Approval was granted by the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee. All participants gave informed consent, and their anonymity was maintained throughout the research process.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed to explore lecturers' experiences and perceptions of institutional support in online course development. This approach enabled rich, in-depth exploration of personal narratives in a complex organisational environment.

Sampling and Participants

A purposive-voluntary sampling strategy was used to recruit 12 lecturers who had recently participated in module and/or qualification development with the Directorate of Curriculum Development and Transformation (DCDT). Invitations to three different focus group interviews were distributed in multiple rounds to ensure broad participation across the colleges.

Data Collection

Three focus group interviews, complemented by semi-structured interview prompts, were conducted. These encouraged reflection on curriculum development, institutional support, and personal experiences. All sessions were video-recorded (with consent), transcribed, and anonymised.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase approach. This iterative process involved generating initial codes, identifying recurring patterns, and categorising them into coherent themes. This method supported a rigorous, transparent analysis grounded in participant narratives.

Discussion of Findings

The research findings are presented and discussed below under six main themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Theme 1: Lecturers perceive the role of collaborative course teams, particularly education consultants, as highly supportive and conducive to their professional growth.

Participants found the EC support both helpful and professionally enriching. As highlighted in the literature, these findings illustrate that instructional designers (ECs) play a critical role in collaborative course design teams. Studies have shown that instructional designers not only contribute specialised pedagogical knowledge but also empower lecturers to undertake the creative process by facilitating meaningful dialogue with them (Adera and Fisher 2019; Pedro and Kumar 2020). This highlights the pivotal role of course development teams in module success.

Theme 2: Lack of institutional planning and resources for online module development creates serious obstacles in the development process.

The analysis indicated that participants perceived online module development at the institution to be hindered by poor planning and a failure to allocate sufficient resources to the development process. For example, many participants reported that their workload became overwhelming when online module development was added to their regular activities. Often, the high workload was partially ascribed to lecturers being compelled to spend time on administrative tasks that were not given to administrative staff or could not be accommodated by these staff members due to their own workload or job descriptions. Large student numbers and high expectations in terms of job performance exacerbated the situation, making it difficult for lecturers to spend sufficient time on module development or to meet all their students' needs. For example, one participant stated: "I would love to be more attentive to my students ... but I simply do not have enough time in my day ... to get to all my KPAs [key performance areas]."

Participants regarded projects with a one-year development timeframe as particularly problematic because, in terms of institutional deadlines, these projects effectively had to be completed in nine months. Such projects, sometimes initiated by academic managers without consulting lecturers, impeded any attempts to plan comprehensively in advance. They also frequently resulted in rushed work and production bottlenecks towards the end of the development period, thus compromising quality. Participants recommended that lecturers should always be consulted before a module is selected for development to ensure they have the capacity, and that a two-year rather than a one-year timeframe should be implemented for module development.

Participants reported difficulties adapting to the new LMS, citing inadequate training. They advocated for incentives such as workload reduction and financial recognition.

Theme 3: Inconsistent service by different support staff and departments compromises the quality of support.

The data revealed that lecturers experienced some inconsistencies in service provision. Principally, participants noted that high workload and short timeframes affected not

only lecturers but also ECs, who were perceived to be struggling with work across multiple projects; as a result, participants encountered several delays and limitations in the service of some ECs. As one solution, participants recommended that DCDT should set up a shared online resource containing guidelines, policy and procedure documents, and examples of good practice. Such a resource, akin to the “good practice guides” endorsed by Ramsay et al. (2019) and Redstone and Luo (2021), would supplement EC support and promote greater self-sufficiency among lecturers. They recommended consistent EC assignments for related modules to streamline development.

Beyond the ECs’ role, language editors and electronic originators were also perceived to cause delays in module development, particularly when tight deadlines created bottlenecks in their departments; and while most participants praised Unisa’s Centre for Professional Development (CPD) for providing staff training, some participants found the training less effective due to a lack of individualisation and interactivity. Addressing these issues requires not only better coordination in the development process but also intradepartmental efforts to improve the quality assurance of academic support services.

Theme 4: Lecturers perceive training as a critical element of support.

Many participants stressed that they perceived training as a critical element of support for module development and the transition to online teaching. This is borne out by literature, which highlights that effective training at an educational institution involves both pedagogical strategies and technological skills (Hako et al. 2021; Isabirye and Makoe 2018). Participants generally found the training provided by Unisa’s Centre for Professional Development (CPD) useful, especially in preparing them to implement Moodle in their courses, but they raised concerns about the lack of attention to individual competencies in training sessions. Their recommendation that CPD should assess the skill levels of lecturers who have registered for workshops and tailor their sessions accordingly is in line with the suggestion by Armstrong (2022) that training programmes should be structured and sequenced to allow progression from foundational to advanced skills.

The participants’ significant training needs were evident in the way the majority eagerly elaborated on numerous topics they wished to explore during training. Most of these topics involved technological-pedagogical competences, for example, training on instructional design, the integration of multimedia elements (videos, animations, infographics), and innovative teaching strategies such as gamification and AI-integrated learning. Participants also emphasised their need for more practical, interactive, hands-on training and training that accommodates their time constraints, such as short, topic-specific videos and on-demand learning modules. Literature supports these preferences, suggesting that applied learning experiences and interactive, individualised workshops and demonstrations are more effective than passive learning methods (Stockley, McDonald and Hoessler 2015; Modise and Zawaki-Richter 2023).

Theme 5: Academic peer collaboration is an integral element of effective support.

The data analysis revealed that academic peer collaboration is a fundamental aspect of support for lecturers during online module development and teaching. Evidence emerged of diverse forms of peer support, including mentoring, informal knowledge sharing, peer coaching, and communities of practice. For example, all the participants' departments offered formal mentoring for newcomers, and some provided job shadowing with a view to job succession. Participants recounted how they were encouraged by informal collegial sharing of experiences, how their knowledge and skills were enhanced by intradepartmental problem-solving meetings, and even how they were assisted by peer-created Moodle training videos. Peer learning and experiential sharing of this nature are recognised by several studies on effective online teaching support (e.g. Isabirye 2015; Richter and Idleman 2017). It further became apparent that several participants were supported by learning communities, including collegial WhatsApp groups and intradepartmental teams, and that these were effective mechanisms for their professional learning. These findings resonate with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice, which not only provide opportunities to share knowledge and skills but also contribute to shaping members' identities as professionals.

Theme 6: Lecturers developed self-efficacy in acquiring new skills where possible and necessary.

It emerged from the data that several lecturers had exhibited self-efficacy in acquiring new skills when institutional support was insufficient or delayed, if they already had the requisite foundational skills. Participants described how they assessed their own skills in technologies like Moodle and Camtasia and, if timely training in the skills they lacked was not immediately available, how they took the initiative to learn aspects of these technologies through their own efforts. This is reminiscent of Redstone and Luo's (2021) view that self-paced learning, reflection, and self-assessment contribute to higher self-efficacy among lecturers. However, in all cases where this was reported, the participants concerned had had prior training in related skills and experience of working with development team role-players in previous development cycles, reinforcing the finding by McMahan (2021) that exposure to professional development enhances autonomous learning and confidence in module development.

Synthesis of Findings and Key Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following interpretations can be drawn in response to the various research questions:

Lecturers perceived the level of support by the university's curriculum design team, particularly ECs, as significantly helpful and conducive to professional growth. The collaborative approach followed by ECs, their knowledge and empathetic encouragement were particularly appreciated. However, a number of challenges, such

as inconsistent procedures and delayed EC responses, were also identified. A similar ambivalence characterised the lecturers' experiences of support by other role-players in the team and broader institution. While they generally experienced good support, especially from academic peers, numerous serious institutional challenges were highlighted: insufficient or inefficient institutional planning and resource allocation for online module development, insufficient training, an inconsistent quality of service in various service departments, and inadequate technological infrastructure.

Lecturers recommended inclusive planning, better infrastructure, tailored training, and workload relief.

A Suggested Model for Support to Lecturers in the Design and Development of Online Courses

Both the literature review and the research findings offered diverse and multifaceted suggestions for providing recommended support to lecturers who develop online courses and engage in online teaching. These recommendations can be integrated into a single model to guide higher education institutions, particularly those offering distance education, to ensure the provision of effective support. The suggested model is grounded in the model of Baran and Correia (2014), but has been structurally reconceptualised, and explicitly integrates a dimension of quality assurance. Furthermore, it is seen as suitable for distance education as it assumes the existence of a well-developed internal infrastructure aimed at large-scale course development and production, which is typical of larger distance providers (Holmberg 2005; Daniel 2023). The model is illustrated in Figure 2 below.

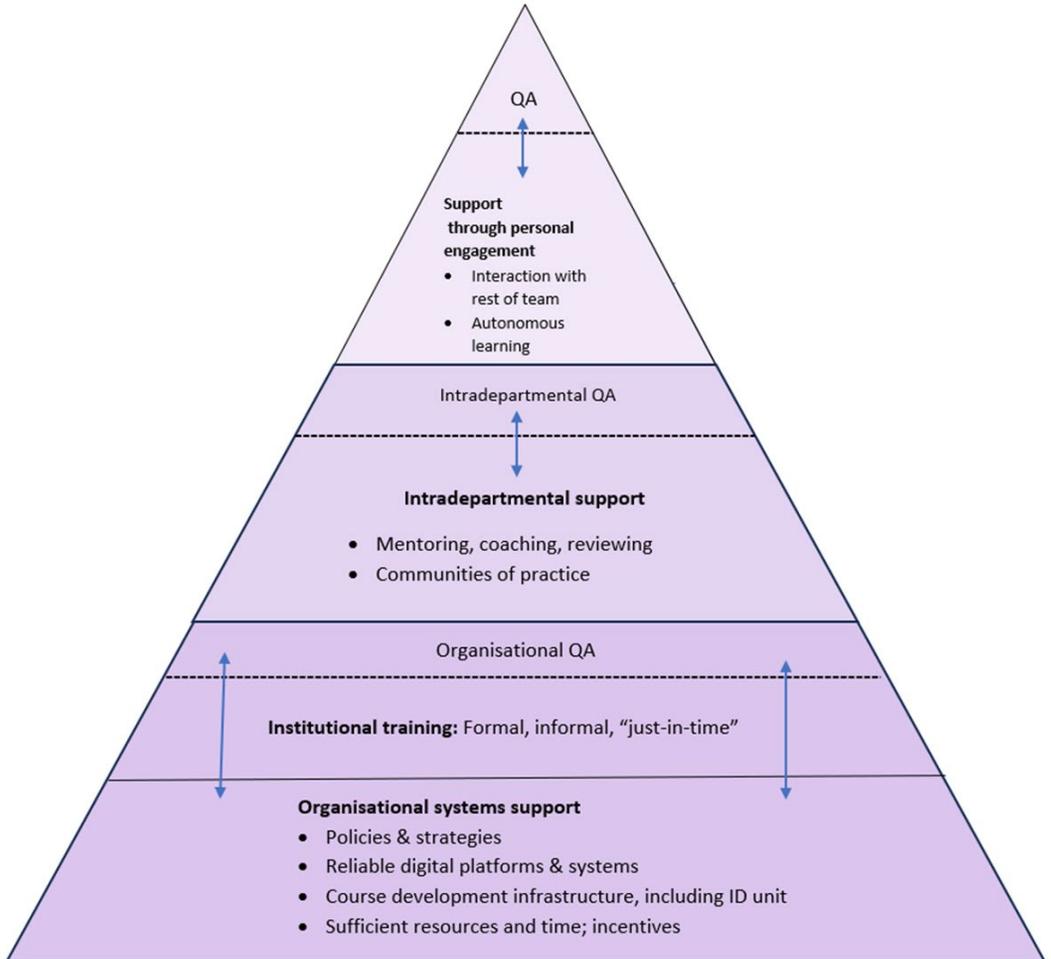


Figure 2: Support model for online design and development

The model is represented as a pyramid to indicate that certain forms of support or activity are fundamental to others: only when they are in place can the next layer of support or activity be fully realised. The elements of the model are as follows:

Organisational Systems Support

This dimension forms the base of the pyramid, since successful online development and teaching at distance education institutions are fully dependent on effective organisational policies, resources, and systems. This level includes the following:

Organisational policies and strategic planning initiatives that promote a culture of online teaching and development supported by collaborative, cross-functional teams.

Reliable Online Platforms, Technologies and Communications

The element of “technology support” described by Baran and Correia (2014) as part of the “teaching level” in their model is relocated here, since the supply and maintenance of relevant technologies are organisational responsibilities, often located in a dedicated information technology department.

Organisational Infrastructure for Course Development

The institution should provide lecturers with instructional design support for online module development, as well as support from other specialist members of course development teams, such as editors and multimedia developers. The role of instructional designers is particularly important and comes into play in the upper level of the model (as described below).

Effective Administrative, Financial and Human Resource Support for Academic Departments

This element is vital since it is the key to the development of courses within time frames that will allow for well-considered and innovative course development without burdening lecturers with an excessive workload. Ideally, staff members involved in online development should be consulted to determine their optimal workload, and this should be considered in resourcing departments. Institutionally, an adequate time frame for development should also be implemented.

Incentives for Online Development

These incentives may include, for example, freeing lecturers who are involved in development projects from other duties, assigning a large weighting to development activities in the performance management system and implementing an institutional award system for excellence in online development.

Institutional Training

This element is, in fact, part of the organisational systems level but is sufficiently important to warrant separate representation in the model. This aspect includes dedicated training by a continuous professional learning unit, as well as more informal training that takes place during interaction with instructional designers and other members of development teams. Training programmes should be diverse, practical, focused on both technological and pedagogical skills, and allow for progression by catering to novice, intermediate, and advanced practitioners.

Intradepartmental Support

The internal policies and culture of an academic department can potentially “make or break” the success of an online development project. Departmental policies and practices should be aligned with institutional policies in supporting and rewarding online development initiatives. At an interpersonal level, coaching and mentoring

should be provided, including peer coaching, peer mentoring, and peer reviewing for more experienced staff members, and job shadowing where relevant. At the departmental level, provision should be made (in terms of time and workload) for communities of practice, which should be encouraged to share good practices and to collectively generate innovative strategies or solutions to development problems.

Support through Personal Engagement

To ensure the development of effective online courses, lecturers need to fully use the support measures provided by both the institution and their department and to apply what they learnt during training. This is realised in the sphere of their personal practice, where further learning takes place through practical, active engagement in the development and teaching process. During course development, lecturers work with instructional designers, a collaboration that serves to generate ideas and designs while simultaneously enhancing the lecturers' knowledge and skills. Interaction with other team members, such as media developers, further serves to support lecturers and to enhance their competencies. At the individual level, a potential positive outcome of the various support measures is enhanced autonomous learning, that is, the ability to reflect on one's own learning experiences and to take personal responsibility for exploring further learning opportunities that will satisfy one's individual needs. Online development and teaching are rendered optimally effective through the combined application of autonomous and collaborative efforts.

Quality Enhancement

An important aspect of the model is to highlight that all the support components have their own integrated quality enhancement mechanisms. At organisational level, an institutional quality assurance framework provides overall guidance and ensures that all departments, for example, ICT, courseware development, and academic departments, have their own aligned quality frameworks in place. Academic departments use peer reviews, qualification and course evaluation, and performance assessment, among other measures, to enhance quality. The course development process itself has several inbuilt formative and summative quality mechanisms, such as academic content reviews, educational reviews by instructional designers and evaluative feedback by students. At the level of personal practice, feedback from peers, information gathered through course evaluation, interaction with students, and student feedback promote a reflection on the quality of a lecturer's teaching and the course itself, providing a springboard for further professional learning. As in all sound quality assurance practices, quality across all these dimensions is conceptualised as a cycle, providing information that leads to improvement in the next round of development and implementation.

While the model is depicted as consisting of various layers, all the layers are connected and interdependent, providing a holistic framework for online development support measures in an educational institution. It is suggested that the application of this model will optimise lecturer support in online course design and development, thus resulting

in more effective online courses and enhanced learning experiences and outcomes for students.

This study was exploratory in nature and limited to a single institution, the University of South Africa (UNISA), which may affect the generalisability of its findings to other contexts. The sample size was relatively small, comprising 12 lecturers who voluntarily participated, which may introduce selection bias and limit the diversity of perspectives captured. Data collection relied solely on focus group interviews, which, while rich in qualitative insight, may have constrained individual expression due to group dynamics. Additionally, the study did not include the perspectives of other key stakeholders involved in the support process, such as ECs or students, which could have provided a more holistic understanding of the support ecosystem.

Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to examine how the proposed model influences lecturer satisfaction, course quality, and student outcomes over time. While this study centres on lecturer support, triangulating findings with student experiences would offer a more holistic, learner-centred evaluation of the model's effectiveness. Comparative studies across South African and international ODeL institutions could also identify both context-specific and transferable support practices, while shedding light on the role of institutional culture in shaping support outcomes. Additionally, research should explore the training and infrastructure required to effectively integrate emerging educational technologies into ODeL environments.

Conclusion

This study illuminated the need for a streamlined organisational support system to assist lecturers in developing and implementing online courses that will maximally enhance student learning. The research revealed that lecturers' most important support needs relate to reliable systems and adequate resources, focused training, collegial collaboration, and learning through practical engagement. These findings informed a suggested model for lecturer support in online course development that holistically integrates support at all organisational levels.

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