UNIVERSITY OF LONDON | CENTRE FOR ONLINE & DISTANCE EDUCATION

Report-on The Centre for Online and Distance Education & The Open University of China Professional Development Course 2022-2023

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Executive summary,

The agreed aim and scope of the staff development course for teachers and course designers of the Open University of China (OUC) is to develop their expertise and practice of distance teaching pedagogy, online learning design, learning assessment, and programme development.

This report provides an overview of achieved outcomes from the 2022-2023 professional development course and reports on evaluations from the perspectives of significant stakeholders: course participants, OUC course tutors, and CODE Fellows.

Based on survey data provided by the OUC course participants and their tutors, and the observations and feedback of the course team who developed and taught the course, we conclude that:

- The course is overall successful in terms of both participant and tutor outcomes, and in relation to feedback form OUC participants and their tutors.
- The OUC participants are overall happy with the course content and the tuition provided by OUC tutors and CODE Fellows. They are very satisfied with the learning they have attained and with the learning experience.
- The OUC tutors have gained in professional expertise from their experience of tutoring on the course; and have learned from the course alongside their students and in collaboration with CODE Fellows.
- Peer learning within and in preparation for tutor group meetings is particularly valued.
- Reflective learning is particularly valued.

We identify some issues that need to be addressed for future delivery of the course:

- Challenges of language barriers
- Challenge of achieving a workable balance between participants' need for sufficient time to engage with the course and the effects of fatigue in a year- long course.
- Participants require a greater focus on the application of learning theories, including case studies illustrating the application of theory in their disciplinary practices.
- Increase in CODE Fellow formative feedback on participant VLE activities.
- Designing for the prevalence of mobile devices

Section 1 Course Overview and course outcomes

1.1 Course background

This professional development course was specifically developed for teachers and curriculum designers at the Open University of China (OUC) and was first taught September 2021 to January 2022. This document reports on the learning experience of the second cohort of OUC participants and their tutors, who studied the same course over an extended period of the full academic year (September 2022-June2023). Some modifications were made to the organisational structure of the 2022-2023 course to promote opportunities for student engagement with the learning materials and peer learning.

The 2022-2023 course is a fully online course, delivered in English via the University of London virtual learning environment (VLE), divided into 3 thematic units each comprising 4 study topics. Each topic is tutored for 2 -weeks with local tutor groups meetings during the first week and large group tutorials led by CODE Fellows online in the second week of each topic. Bi-weekly asynchronous discussion activities on the VLE are also tutored.

The aim of the course is to support participants to develop their expertise and practice of distance teaching pedagogy, online learning design, assessment, and programme development. Designed with a focus on active learning and reflection on professional practice, participants are encouraged to reflect on their experience as learners on the course and to then consider the implications for their role as educators. Peer engagement through discussion and tutor groups' interaction is core to the design.

In 2022-23 there were 100 participants, based in 10 tutor groups, each led and taught by two local tutors who are themselves members of the academic or curriculum development staff teams at the Open University of China. As in the 2021-2022 cohort there is considerable diversity in participants' disciplinary subject area, their roles within OU China, their teaching contexts and the length and nature of their teaching experience. The OU of China have set quite a high English language competence level threshold for participants, and all OUC tutors are fluent in English and familiar with the academic culture of English-speaking nations. Nevertheless, there is inevitable variation in participants' English language proficiency and confidence levels in engaging in a UK -based professional academic development programme in English.

1.2. Course outcomes

1.2.1 OU of China participants

At the conclusion of the course, in July 2023, a total 95 of 99[1] participants successfully completed the short course. Four participants did not meet the 80% criteria participation criteria for successful completion of 4 of 5 digital badges due to heavy workloads and personal family commitments.

[1] One participant left their job at OU of China during the course.

Digitised University of London certificates of successful completion of the course were awarded to 95 participants and to all tutors.

In addition, each successful course participant gained up to five bespoke digital badges by completing tracked activities and coursework, delivered across the virtual learning environment. The participant digital badges awarded are:

- Learning outcomes
- Learning design
- Learning activity design
- Technology for learning
- Assessment and feedback

1.2.2. OU of China Tutors

All tutors gained the certificate of successful completion of the course as they directly engaged with the course learning through their role. Tutors additionally received a certificate certifying their work as a tutor on the course. And finally tutors received two bespoke digital badges on completion of progress and evaluation reports.

- Effective support for online and distance learning
- Evaluation and enhancement of learning.

1.2.3. CODE Participant award

A special award is given each year to one participant in each of the tutor groups, who have demonstrated outstanding engagement, collaboration, and innovation on the course. The recipients of the award are nominated by their group tutors. This year 11 participants have received a participant award as two individuals within one tutor group are recognised for their achievement.

The CODE Participant Award winners 2022-23 are:

Group 1: Xuliang Wang and Hui Li
Group 2: Xiaoying Zhang
Group 3: Wenjuan Hu
Group 4: Ding Li
Group 5: Wensheng Huang
Group 6: Yang Pan
Group7: Huiyong Miao
Group 8: Yaqi Wu
Group 9: Jing Li
Group 10: Lin Li

Section 2 Review of course organisational model

In the following two sections, we provide a review of the course which draws on feedback from key stakeholders. We consider the organisational model for the course and then the course content separately but acknowledge the overlap between these areas of learning design.

2.1. Overview of the organisational model

The objectives of this organisational design were to support the flow of communication between the CODE Fellows, the OUC tutors and the participants. An important objective is to provide a channel for interaction and feedback between the CODE Fellows and the course participants.

There are four interrelated elements in the course that make up the organisational model:

- The course materials and learning activities which are studied individually, and the group discussion forums for each topic are on the University of London's Moodle VLE, and accessed remotely by the course participants.
- Participants attend a one- hour tutor group meeting with their OUC tutor for each topic (80% attendance rate required).
- Participants attend a 60–90-minute cluster group tutorial per topic which is tutored within Zoom by CODE Fellows with the support of the OUC tutors. A cluster tutorial is a combined session for 3 tutor groups (and one cluster group of 4 tutor groups) and their tutors. Each session is an interactive tutorial based on the topic learning outcomes. Participants attend the same cluster tutorial group with one "home" CODE tutor and one guest CODE tutor throughout the course. (Average live attendance rate of 62.5% with other colleagues watching video recordings of the sessions due to scheduling difficulties. 80% attendance rate is required).
- Course team meetings of OUC tutors and CODE Fellows are held at mid-point of for each unit to review the course, and to plan ahead. The OUC tutors also provide a formal, written mid-point review on their tutor group's experience and progress, and their own experience of tutoring the course to CODE in February/March. This review informs planning and our approach to the remainder of the course.

Course Team 2022-23

OU of China Tutors	Centre for Online and Distance Education Tutors	
Tengfei Ma*	Dr Christina Howell-Richardson	CODE
Lu Zhu	Dr Linda Amrane-Cooper	CDE, UoL
Heng Hu	Professor Stephen Brown	CODE
Feier Wang	Professor Ayona Silva-Fletcher	Royal Veterinary College
Ana Niu	Dr David Baume	CODE
Hongyi Shiyang	Dr Clare Sansom	Birkbeck, University of London
Bei Huang	Dr Jonathan San Diego	King's College, London

Min Liang	Dr Gwyneth Hughes	UCL
Qin Cui	Professor Stylianos Hatzipanagos	CODE
Fa Zhang	Dr Matthew Phillpott	CODE
Ling Zhao	Dr Lynsie Chew	UCL
Shihan Xu	Dr Julie Voce	City University, London
Chang Liu*	Professor Alan Parkinson	UCL
Xuanwei Liu	Professor Helen Xanthaki	UCL
Ling Li	Huw Morgan Jones	UCL
Xuefei Li		
Weixuan Ye		
Chengbin Yang		
Huizhuo Zhang		
Jing Yuan		
Lena Chen & Xiaoqian Liu OU of China Liaison and co-ordinators *Tutors Tengfei Ma and Chang Liu were also Visiting Scholars at UoL CODE February – June 2023		

2022-2023 element	Replaces 2021-2022 element	Reason for change
Course length: September -June	Course length: September – January[2]	To allow time for engagement with the course content and pedagogical approach of the course.
2-week study time per topic (12 topics)	1 week study time per topic (12 topics)	The course participants work full time. Studying in English increases the workload and cognitive load.
3 thematic units of 4 topics each	12 topics in sequence	To provide a broad conceptual mapping of course design, teaching and assessment.
Cluster Group Tutorials	Whole group Webinar	To enhance opportunities for tutorial interactions between CODE tutors and participants and for peer learning
100 course participants in 10 tutor groups & 2 tutors per group	249 course participants in 13 tutor groups & 1 tutor per group	To increase a sense of a learning community, to foster peer learning and improve learning outcomes.
Termly course team meetings of OUC + CODE tutors	Weekly debriefing meeting of OUC tutors with CODE tutors	OUC and CODE tutors working in partnership
Explicit bilingualism policy in Webinars and VLE postings	English only used in all CODE webinars	To reduce the effect of language barriers inhibiting participation

Table 1: Overview of key changes to organisational model 2022/2023 cohort[3]

[2] 2021-2022 Course ended before the Chinese New Year

[3] Refer to Evaluation report of OUC/CODE short course 2021-2022

2.2 Evaluation of the organisational model

This section presents a summary of participant feedback from the final survey. The discussion that follows (2.2.2) is organised as a discussion of key themes within the qualitative data from the OUC tutor final survey and mid-point reviews, and the observations of CODE tutors, which allows a more nuanced interpretation of the participant survey data.

2.2.1. OUC Participant feedback

	Course content / materials on the VLE were good.	Participation in the CODE cluster tutorials was valuable to me.	Participation in the tutor group was valuable to me.	There was good engagement in VLE discussion forums.	The weekly course structure was good.	The course was the right length	The balance of Chinese and English was about right
Overall positive responses	**98%**	**96%**	**96%**	**82%**	**90%**	**90%**	**90%**
Strongly agree	41	38	40	27	36	30	30
Partly agree	8	10	8	14	9	15	15
Neutral		1	1	7	4	4	2
Partly disagree				1			2
Strongly disagree	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Table 2 – Participant feedback organisational model - final survey 18-07-2023 (N= 50)

1. Case studies (1st choice – 38.3%) 2. Videos[4] (1st choice – 10.6%) 3. Practical activities (1st choice – 6.4%) 4. VLE workbooks (1st choice – 14.1%) 5. Feedback from CODE Fellows (1st choice – 0%; 2nd choice – 10.6%) 6. Interaction with CODE Fellows (in cluster tutorials) on Padlet or polls (1st choice – 6.4%) 7. Flexibility in schedule (1st choice – 14.9%) 8. Tutor led Groupwork (1st choice – 4.3%) 9. CODE webinars (1st choice – 4.3%)

Table 3: Participants' value ranking of 9 suggested elements -final survey 18-07-2023 (N= 50)

2.2.2 Discussion

Local Tutor group Meetings

Most OUC tutors reported that the local tutor group meetings were a central component in participants' learning, establishing a community of learners where co-operative learning, peer mentoring and free, critical discussion thrived. This account aligns with the participant survey feedback.

One or two local tutor groups deviated from this pattern, with tutors reporting relatively low levels of engagement in discussion and one OUC tutor has specifically advised more guidance from CODE Fellows in how to lead the local tutorials. In 2022-23 the local tutors exercised greater autonomy over the tutorials than in the previous year and regular meetings were held within OUC while the OUC/CODE team meetings were reduced to twice a term. Overall, this strategy, along with the recruitment of confident and experienced local tutors by the OUC has proved successful in supporting learning and building professional relationships.

Several OUC tutors and participants identify with the course as a provision of the Open University of China and are motivated by the opportunities for institutional-wide -dialogue and professional development within their own organisation.

> (Tutor)- And this term, I acquaint with colleagues from different branches in our team. It is a great opportunity. and we can do the research if it's possible.
>
> (Tutor)- Interact with students (colleagues in the local tutor groups) from all over the country and learn from each other (2 tutors)
>
> (Participant) This training made me fully realize the importance of learning cost for in-service staff. The teaching in the University of London is very humanized, given by local teachers and organized by the National Open University, which makes me learn easily. The learning content is also of great help to my work.

[4] Videos here refers mainly to recordings of cluster tutorials and webinars.

CODE Cluster tutorials-

The cluster tutorials were designed to offer a seminar-type experience for participants, structured around a combination of CODE tutor reviews of key concepts and of participants' work on the VLE, and interactive peer discussions followed by CODE tutor feedback.

The principle of the design is good but there were challenges in implementation. Participants mainly enjoyed the small group discussion in breakout rooms that allowed them to debate and analyse the topic content in Chinese with colleagues outside their own tutor groups. However, conversational exchanges between OUC participants and CODE tutors were limited and were typically mediated by voting polls or by publication of a summary of their group discussion in a Padlet.

Based on course team discussions and the tutor mid-point and final reviews the main reasons for low levels of conversational interaction between participants and CODE Fellows in the zoom meetings were:

Timing – Due to time zone differences the 9.00-10.30 /17.00 -18.30 cluster tutorials are scheduled after the OUC working day, which culturally is the family mealtime at home. Many participants relied on catch up recordings of the tutorial, which did not include a recording of the breakout room discussions.

Language barriers- The tutorials are synchronous, involving multiple speakers and requiring oral responses and engagement in real time within the Zoom meeting environment. This is very challenging for those who have less than total fluency and socially difficult and unfamiliar for Chinese participants. As a result, the local tutors took on the role of translators using the Chat function and participants who chose to contribute in plenaries did so by writing in English or in Chinese in Chat.

Mobile learning- Many participants accessed the tutorials on a phone which impacts on the experience of using or viewing supplementary digital tools (e.g. Padlet) . Due to the scheduling of the meetings, OUC participants were often connecting to the tutorial in public or domestic spaces affecting their experience or capacity to interact.

VLE discussion forums/activities

Responses on the participant survey on the question of whether completion of the badge activities on the VLE helped their learning indicate the VLE based activities were the least valued element of the course[5]. The intention in the course design was to promote asynchronous shared learning by linking the award of digital badges (as required to attain the course certificate) to specific VLE tasks. However, as confirmed by the survey feedback, the course team observed a marked variation in the quality of participant VLE posting, with an over-riding trend to individual, one -off and isolated messaging.

[5] strongly agree [34], partly agree [13], neutral [1], strongly disagree [1]. No response [1]

The CODE tutors engaged with the VLE contributions in the form of text-based feedback posted to the forum after topic completion, and by discussing examples of the participants' VLE work in the cluster tutorials. However, as confirmed by OUC tutors' feedback, this approach was not sufficiently timely to effectively support learning or motivate participants to contribute.

> (Tutor) We should increase the interaction with students, increase their sense of participation in online courses, and encourage students to study independently.

Scheduling: 2-week structure + course length

Despite the slightly measured agreement in the participant survey that the course length is appropriate, there is overwhelming agreement that the course length needs to be reduced repeatedly expressed in free text in both OUC participants and tutors' surveys. OUC participants have also called for flexibility in the course schedule, to replace the paced cohort 2-weekly pattern. The need for flexibility is well understood as participants have consistently identified the work-study conflict as the primary obstacle to their participation and engagement on the course. This surpasses even language barriers which 80% of OUC participants consider a challenge to learning.

However, there is an as-yet unresolved incompatibility between providing opportunities for timely shared learning and tuition, as occurs in the local tutor groups and cluster tutorials, and a flexible, self-paced schedule. Equally, reducing the course length to the original length of 4-5 months reduces the opportunity to critically master pedagogical concepts that most course participants are initially unfamiliar with.

> (Tutor)- This time the course was so long that it was difficult for participants to stay engaged. But as a participant last year, I think the 12-week learning schedule was a little tight. It is so hard to arrange the duration and the capacity of the course properly.

2..2.3 Recommendations

- Increase timeliness and frequency of CODE Fellow feedback on participants VLE activities.
- Reduce overall course length.
- Reduce the volume and workload of the individual topics.
- Reconfigure cluster tutorials to a presentation (TEDx approach) followed by a Q and A meeting moderated by the topic authors/CODE Fellows

Section 3- Evaluation of course content and learning

3.1 Course Content

3.1.1 Participant survey data

	Learning about Course Design was valuable	Studying Learning Theories was valuable	Learning about Learning Technologies was valuable	Learning about Formative Assessment was valuable	Learning about Programme Monitoring and Evaluation was valuable
Overall Positive responses					
Strongly agree	40	43	38	43	42
Partly agree	8	6	10	6	6
Neutral			1		1
Partly disagree	1				
Strongly disagree	1	1	1	1	1

Table 4 - Participant feedback on course content - final survey 18-07-2023 (N= 50)

teaching theories/educational theories (7) learning theories (6) curriculum design /course design (4) locating information resources /OER's (4) assessment (3) formative feedback (3) Technology Enhanced learning (3) Unit 1 (2)

Table 5: Participants' ranking of valued learning content - final survey 18-07-2023 (N= 50)
Data extracted from a wider data set in free text response to "which parts of the course were most valuable to you? "

3.1.2 Discussion

As in section 2 this discussion presents a summary of key themes within the qualitative data from the OUC tutor final survey and mid-point reviews, and the observations of CODE tutors, which serve to inform the participant survey data.

The OUC tutors report that they find the VLE course content well-developed with a good tutorial coverage of the key aspects of constructivist approaches to learning and teaching. Developing knowledge of constructivist learning theories and educational theories is identified as the most significant strength of the course content – directly mirroring the participant feedback data of table 5. The tutors, and their tutor groups, have developed knowledge and confidence in their capacity to implement student centred, interactive learning activities and to tutor and assess learning within this approach.

> (Tutor): In-depth and systematic understanding of the theoretical basis and practical application of distance open education, and reflection and summary of teaching experience, have many benefits for teaching work.
>
> (Tutor)- Launched a new teaching mode: 1. realizing the learning and teaching theory systematically and 2. Knowing what they have had under the background of their culture and knowledge and what they need to take in under a more basic and universal level.

However, a central theme in the OUC Tutors' and participants' feedback is the need to explore how to apply the theoretical content in practice- which should be given equivalent or equal in weighting to the presentation of theory. OUC colleagues require more instructional and tutorial guidance from CODE Fellows in how to implement theories within their own teaching contexts, addressing the dimensions of their disciplinary contexts and their work within a national, open distance education university with a highly diverse student population and large learning groups.

> (Participant)- - If we can have some practical case study or research projects, it will be much better to absorb what we have learned from the course[6]
>
> (Participant)- I would appreciate the chance to observe some authentic online teaching clips in open distant education context of Britain and China, which show how the intended theories, methods, concepts, or digital technologies are used in reality respectively.

[6] 6 tutors recommended the inclusion of case studies and input on the application of theory

Two further recommendations of the OUC tutors are:

- provide an overview mapping of the key content of each topic on as connected information is scattered across topics. or provide a search tool to enable users to find related information across topics on the VLE.
- provide readings developed for generic academic development within HE, as Education disciplinary readings create a disciplinary language barrier.

3.2. Learning -process and outcomes

All OUC colleagues (participants and tutors) have foregrounded the value of developing the practices of reflective learning and peer learning as a core part of their learning process on this course.

> (Tutor) -as an observer, I can observe how adults learn an online course, which helps me to consider their learning difficulties and find out the solution to help them complete the whole course.
>
> (Participant): Workbooks are useful for self-reflection and future planning.

While one or two tutor groups did not form as a connected learning group and participants studied individually, peer learning, within the local tutor group community, has been praised and valued by most OUC tutors. Several tutors have cited examples of senior colleagues voluntarily sharing their prior learning and insights with less experienced tutor group members and taking the initiative in group discussions. These OUC tutors have also consistently referred to their tutor group meetings as spaces for shared learning and co-operative learning.

> (Tutor) A good thing about the course is.] Interacting with students (colleagues in the local tutor groups) from all over the country and learning from each other

Again, the main area for improvement is in respect to direct interaction between the participants and the CODE Fellows. The cluster group tutorials are intended as the space for direct interaction between CODE Fellows and the participants. However, due to language barriers and socio-technical challenges these interactions were usually mediated by the OUC tutors.

The two tables following summarise the main personal learning outcomes identified by the course participants (table 6) and tutors (table 7).

the principles of learning design, when planning the course, I will try to implement the principles of learning design in course design (7)
design to meet ILO's using the constructive alignment principle (2)
the ICARE model + activity types (2)
introduce formative feedback in learning activities and on homework (8)
collaborative learning (2) / co-operative learning (2) Problem based learning (3)
how to plan and manage group work (5)
reflected on how to evaluate students' work (4)
changed an assessment practice (4)

Table 6- Participants' responses to: What new idea have you tried in practice?

Designing for learning	Tutoring distance education tutors
Ascertaining the learning outcome and principles of constructive alignment (5) Following students in time and giving them feedback in a positive way (formative feedback) (5) course design principles as learning design underpinned by theory (6) Designing assignments and tasks based on learners' types/diverse learner groups "As teaching designers, we need to pay attention to the personalized needs of different students, and the curriculum design needs to be able to adapt to different learning environments and scenarios"	The need for active strong teacher social presence and teaching presence to guide them to develop as self-regulated learners (6) the importance of practical activities and related discussions to keep them motivated and interested (4) teachers need to be kept up to date with technologies and the pedagogical uses of technologies (6) the importance of the 7 principles of good feedback practice (2) the importance of clarifying expectations to carry out online and offline teaching and research meetings to promote the application of new ideas in course teaching (4)

Table 7: Tutors' responses What are the main things you have learned about?

3.3 Recommendations

- Inclusion of more material and resources that illustrate and provide guidance on the application of theory in practice.
- inclusion of activities and resources that support discussion of disciplinary-based teaching.
- increase in timely feedback provided by CODE Felows on VLE activities.