

Building online education capacity during a pandemic - from concept to action in developing regions.

Ms Brenda Mallinson, Rhodes University, South Africa

Abstract:

This paper describes a learning journey which started with a COL-supported webinar series addressing 'Learning Design leading to Sensitisation for Online Course Development using OER'. The webinar OER materials were hosted on Moodle and required participants to complete a series of related online activities interspersed between the synchronous sessions. The high-level output of this stage was the drafting of an institutional, faculty, or departmental action plan to propagate deeper understanding and new skills at an institutional level. The second stage was the refinement of these Action Plans using a Results-Based Management approach, with the third stage being the COL-supported implementation of these plans.

In a COL collaboration with the Southern African Development Community Centre for Distance Education (SADC-CDE), the first cohort of 39 participants were drawn from four educational institutions: College of Open Schooling (COS) at Botswana Open University (BOU); Institute for Adult Education (IAE) in Tanzania; Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre (LDTC); and Namibia College of Open Learning (NAMCOL). COS BOU, LDTC, and NAMCOL continued this journey through to the final (3rd) implementation stage.

A revised webinar programme was repeated for the West African Sub-region (WASR) under a COL collaboration with the Regional Training and Research Institute for Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL). This involved 39 participants from Cameroon, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia, drawn from educational institutions and national education ministries. Although this cohort did not progress to the 2nd stage of action plan refinement supported by COL, intentions were to refine plans at a national level for the WASR States.

Throughout the webinar series regular online reflections were encouraged using the Moodle blog, and a final reflection based on the Brookfield Critical Incident Questionnaire was undertaken at the conclusion of each cohort experience. Useful feedback was obtained indicating factors that sparked engagement and what constituted challenges for each cohort.

Finally, findings relating to the two cohorts' engagement and experience of their journeys are presented, and achievements of participating institutions and countries with reference to their goals and plans are recognised. Lessons learned by the project leader and collaborators are identified, and potential improvements suggested. The projects took place during the COVID-19 pandemic within which all participating institutions and the facilitator were in lockdown in their home countries (2020/2021) and experienced associated challenges.

Keywords: Online learning design; Online learning development; OER; Professional development; Developing countries; Action Planning; Open Schooling; higher education institution.;

Background/Context

A concept note on Open and Innovative Schooling for Commonwealth States of the SADC region developed by COL and the Director SADC-CDE in early 2020 recognised the situation regarding the 200 hundred million secondary school aged out-of-school children (UNICEF, 2018; Mays and Singh, 2020) and proposed an initiative to engage/re-engage with partners on aspects of COL's Open and Innovative Schooling Model (COL, 2017) with particular emphasis on technology-enabled learning. The original idea was to undertake a baseline study in the region and identify gaps relative to teacher/tutor preparedness, ministry/institutional resources, and technological capacity. This would be followed by a capacity enhancement intervention to address the identified needs.

While Mallinson, Monyemangene, and Augusti (2017) noted that many academic staff at African higher education institutions experienced pressure to engage with using information and communication technologies (ICT) this was later exacerbated with the advent of the COVID pandemic and was expanded to include many open and secondary schooling sectors. This situation determined that the COL/SADC-CDE intervention would take place online as a series of webinars related to the use of technology, and focusing on 'learning resources, pedagogy, online platforms, etc'. There would also be a significant participatory component for practical implementation, as well as sufficient time to be devoted to creating plans related to institutional propagation, with support from colleagues and the facilitator/consultant. (Perris & Amey, 2020)

The pandemic brought with it the 'knee-jerk' response of what came to be known as "Emergency Remote Teaching" (ERT) where even those educational institutions who were already deploying online teaching and learning struggled to keep up with the demands of their institutions. While this ERT approach served many as an initial response, it was not necessarily pedagogically sound nor sustainable. In his blog, Bates (2016) defines online learning as: "... any form of learning conducted partly or wholly over the Internet." Bates goes on to say: "However, with the emergency measures taken during the Covid-19 pandemic, commentators have made the

distinction between deliberately designed online learning and the emergency measures used to move all instruction online in the spring of 2020:

- Emergency Remote Teaching: “is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated.” (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond, 2020)
- Online Learning: A form of distance education in which a course or program is intentionally designed in advance to be delivered fully online. Faculty use pedagogical strategies for instruction, student engagement, and assessment that are specific to learning in a virtual environment."

Approach

The intentional or deliberate approach to online course design, development, implementation, and provision was chosen as a sustainable way forward within the context of (initially) the SADC region. The purpose was to capacitate staff at participating institutions with the means to not only continue to provide pedagogically sound teaching and learning during the pandemic but to build resilience within the institution to continue this despite challenging environmental conditions.

The approach taken for the *initial stage* (Webinar series) was informed by relevant contextual literature such as Aczel, Peake, and Hardy, P. (2008), Hodgkinson-Williams and Mallinson (2020), Krull and Mallinson (2013), Mallinson and Krull (2015), and drew on prior experience of the COL consultant who has worked in the area of staff development for use of Educational Technologies for over 2 decades at higher education institutions in sub-Saharan Africa. While this prior experience always included the use of Educational Technology as a primary reference point even when engaging face-to-face (F2F), in this instance the entire project was conceived, designed, implemented, supported, and evaluated remotely online. In each case, the Moodle LMS was used to provide the webinar series in conjunction with Zoom as a live conferencing system for synchronous group interaction.

Needs were identified in conjunction with the SADC-CDE via a baseline survey, and initial topics identified. (Perris & Amey, 2020). The OER programme and materials were developed by the COL consultant with input received from the COL advisor and SADC-CDE director. Materials used comprised a reuse and remix of existing OER, with many activities being adapted from the 7Cs of Learning Design model developed at University of Leicester (2012). The consultant provided the Moodle server for this cohort, with support provided for the later implementation project stage by the BOU and NAMCOL institutional technical support teams and their respective Moodle servers. The LDTC team received technical support from COL for their Moodle sever implementation from an additional COL consultant.

The design of the webinar series was guided by the concept of modelling openness with respect to course design, development, implementation, and open licencing elements as presented by Mallinson, Monyemangene and Augusti (2017) in their Digital Fluency course development process. This openness model shown in Figure 1 was adhered to where possible in the SADC-CDE context, with many OER materials being adapted, reused, and remixed, using the Moodle open source LMS platform, and licencing for reuse. This model is in direct alignment with the COL’s commitment to openness within their Mission, Vision, and Strategy (COL, 2022).

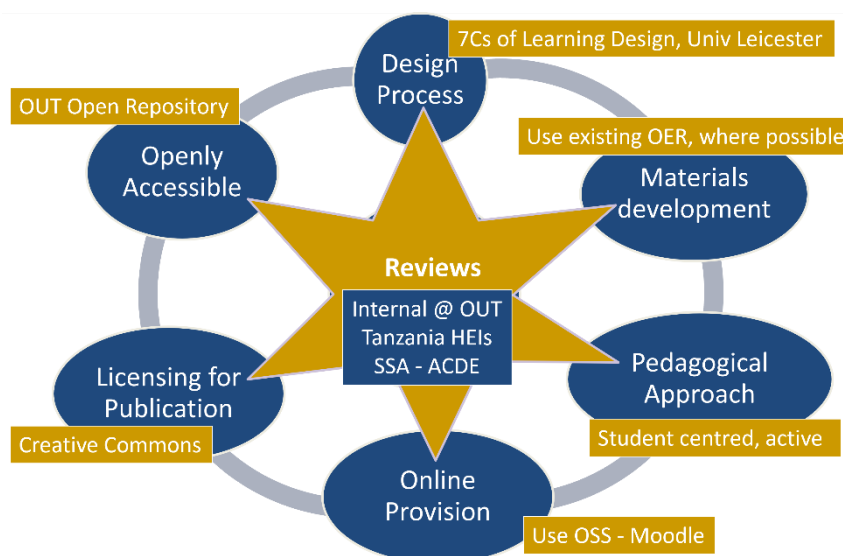


Figure 1: Modelling Openness (Mallinson, Monyemangene, and Augusti, 2017)

The first cohort comprised partnerships with one (1) open schooling institution from each of four (4) SADC countries supported by COL and the SADC-CDE (housed at BOU) during the 2nd half of 2002. The high-level output of the webinar series would be a draft action plan for each institution developed collectively or individually. In addition, high-achieving participants were identified as possible champions to take forward initiatives at their institution. Within this cohort, the language of all institutional instruction was English.

The second cohort involved the WASR region where RETRIDOL took a significant coordination role as a West-African research and training organisation based at NOUN and with reach extending throughout this region. This intervention was slightly different with COL partnering with multiple educational institutions in each country as well as national ministries. RETRIDOL also provided the Moodle server on which to mount the Webinar series given the role they already played in West Africa. Again, the high-level output of the webinar series would be a draft action plan for each institution or country developed collectively or individually. Once more, high-achieving participants were identified as possible champions to take initiatives forward at their institution or within their country. Participants in this second cohort comprised both English and French language speakers, although the Webinar series was provided again in English.

The materials were revised and improved by the COL consultant according to feedback from the first cohort implementation evaluation as well as cognisance of the WASR baseline survey implemented by COL. A mid-series (end-of-year) break was introduced to allow consolidation and catchup time for busy academic and national ministry staff participating in the project.

The *second stage* of refining the draft Action plans was guided by the COL Results-Based Management (RBM) approach shared by the COL liaison. The COL consultant and the SADC-CDE director spent some time examining the model and explaining the application of this RBM model to participants within the project context. The NAMCOL team were very responsive to feedback and in collaboration with the consultant, a constructive multi-layered system evolved for their plan which has now been finalised and accepted for continued work with COL. This system was shared with the other participating institutions as a useful approach in refining their plan.

During the *third stage* of implementing the plans, COL was able to approach consultants with particular relevant expertise to support the approved activities for each institution taking place from 2021-2023.

Process and structure

This was informed by the overall purpose of the COL/SADC-CDE and COL/WASR activity which was to engage/re-engage with partners on digitising curricula for the partner institutions and/or national ministries. The webinar series outcomes were designed to enhance the capability of the participants to, in turn, train staff at their institutions or nationally, in order to widen online teaching and learning concepts and practice.

Stage 1: Webinar series

The high-level outcomes of Phase 1 (Webinar series) were for participants to be guided to deepen their understanding of the process and practice necessary to:

- design an online course using a systematic process, and
- develop an awareness of systematically moving from design to development.

High level output: participants will develop an institutional, faculty, or departmental Action Plan to propagate deeper understanding and new skills at an institutional and/or national level. As shown in Table 1, the intervention comprised:

- Six synchronous themed webinars of 2 hours each using Zoom
- Ongoing asynchronous pre- and post-webinar interaction using the Moodle LMS.

Table 1: Stage 1 Webinar Series Schedule

Phase	Theme	Mode
Preparation (Pre-Webinar)	Preparing to Engage Online	Activity
Orientation (Webinar 1)	Teaching and Learning Online in Context	Live synchronous meetings each followed by guided asynchronous online activity in Moodle and in participants' practice courses.
High-level Design 1 (W2)	Blended Learning and Pedagogy	
High-level Design 2 (W3)	Mapping our Courses	
Activities & Interactivity (W4)	Designing Interaction & Engagement	
Resources (W5)	Resources - Focus on OER	
Planning for Institutional Dissemination (W6)	Wrap up and Action Planning Deadline for submitting Draft Action Plan.	Live synchronous meeting followed by asynchronous development of an Action Plan.

The final output of an Action Plan ((institutional/national; group/individual) was key to the process as it drew focus on the specific local needs as identified by the participants. The initial concepts for the plan were shared by participants on a wiki in the Moodle course that hosted the Webinar series materials. This enabled participants to bounce ideas around, identify opportunities for collaboration, develop ideas further, and become inspired by their fellow participants. The enthusiasm generated augured well for obtaining buy-in for the plan when taken back to the intuitions.

Initially a high bar relative to expectations was set for certification, with later relaxation of expectations as a result of discussions between the consultant and the COL and SADC-CDE liaison persons. The first cohort (SADC-CDE) resulted in 26 (of 39) participants achieving certificates of Completion or Participation. All four (4) of the participating institutions went on to Stage 2. For this SADC-CDE cohort the overall gender representation in the Webinar series had been 54% female.

The second cohort (WASR) who engaged with the revised Webinar series, were again provided with some leniency with regard to certification as they were operating under severe limitations due to the pandemic and other environmental factors. Certificates of Completion or Participation were provided to 17 (of 39) participants. Stage 2 (Refinement of draft Action Plans) was not offered to this cohort, although the intention was that this would be followed up at an institutional or national level in each participating country. Unfortunately, the author was not able to obtain information as to whether these plans had been acted upon. Although gender was not indicated females were not well represented being at most 4 of the 39 participants, and males submitted all 11 of the Action Plans.

Stage 2: Refinement of Institutional Action Plans

This stage was crucial in taking the draft action plans forward with the intention of propagating deeper understanding and new skills at an institutional level. The thinking for this stage was that the participants themselves, armed with their experience and knowledge gained during the webinar series would be ideally positioned to identify the needs of their students, staff, and institutions, what local support units were available to implement their plans, what would work within their context, which senior management onboarding and approval would be required, and generally how best to approach implementation of their Action Plans. A guidance document providing these types of thought-provoking questions had been shared with participants for the final activity of Stage 1, and as this document was later updated for the second cohort, the SADC-CDE cohort had the benefit of having access to the updated guidance while refining their Action Plans.

During this stage, the COL consultant interacted individually with small teams from the four (4) SADC-CDE institutions to monitor and support further refinement of their Action Plans in detail for approval by COL, who could then decide to assign consultants to support the implementation. At BOU and NAMCOL female participants drove the refinement of the Draft Action Plans, while at LDTC and IAE the team leaders were male.

Communication and interaction between the consultant and the teams took place over 4 months and included Moodle internal Messaging and Announcements (these generated emails to all original Webinar series participants and were intended to highlight ongoing activity for the entire cohort), synchronous Zoom meetings where ideas were discussed and guidance provided, emails regarding the same, and the periodic email submission of evolving plans for feedback from the consultant. The final step was the submission of the refined Action Plans to the COL liaison person for approval and funding consideration. Three of the four institutions were successful in obtaining further funding from COL to undertake implementation of their Action Plans.

Stage 3: Institutional / Country Implementation and Propagation

BOU hosts the regional SADC-CDE Directorate, allowing for close cooperation/collaboration with international partners such as COL. Action Plan implementation at COS (BOU) is still in the early stages. (Table 2)

Table 2: COS BOU Action Plan Implementation (BOU, 2022)

Activity	Achieved
BOU project team coordinators appointed	Two (2) persons were appointed, monthly meetings convened, & leadership tasks undertaken. Tasks assigned with reference to Gantt charts etc.
Establishment of Subject Groups for JC online Moodle course development	Subject Specialist Programme Developers, Editorial Team (language & technical), E-learning Specialist, Graphic Designers, Production Specialist (Multimedia), OS Regional Managers, Assessment Officers, and Librarians.
Development of 6 Junior Certificate (JC) courses	Online capacity building workshop completed Participants included Online course development ongoing.
Complete JC course development, apply Quality Assurance processes, pilot, review & roll-out, launch.	Still to do in 2022.

At LDTC, the implementation plan centred around capacity building and development of an institutional LMS as they did not have a provision for online teaching and learning at that time. The LDTC action plan comprised training workshops on Moodle Site Development and Maintenance, Course Design, and a Writing Retreat. All three (3) workshops took place as planned, with an interim Moodle cloud server being mounted, further course design collaborative work taking place, and the development and adoption of a flipped learning model closely aligned to the LDTC current system of operations - print and F2F tutorials. According to the LDTC technical team, this has now paved the way for a further learning journey involving the development and uploading of learner content. The outcomes of this plan are now the emergence of a new Moodle site via a collaboration between the Lesotho Communication Authority (LCA) and the Ministry of Education. At time of reporting, four (4) LGCSE subjects were uploaded to this server and accessible. It was determined that further staff sensitization to this platform should be provided going forward, as well as orientation for students and tutors at all study centres, with virtual training for those out of the country. (LDTC, 2021).

The NAMCOL team was fortunate to already enjoy the leadership of an eLearning Programme Manager supported by a Moodle technical team who administered the local LMS. Some of the activities in their Action plan were supported by a COL appointed consultant who was able to contribute many existing useful OERs and their implementation was successful with a huge amount of sustained hard work by the local team. Several short courses were developed and piloted, and the revised Webinar series course (LDD) was repurposed and offered with local facilitators (Table 2). Outstanding activities such as the follow-up writing retreat and Moodle training were rescheduled for 2022. (NAMCOL, 2022)

Unfortunately, at this time, no information is available regarding implementation of the IAE Action Plan in partnership with COL.

Table 3: NAMCOL Action Plan Implementation

Repurposing, Updating, and Remixing of Short Courses	Piloting the Short Courses
Introduction to Open Educational Resources (IOER)	Sept-Oct 2021 – 93 participants (reduced to 55 active) Offered in 2 modes: self-paced and facilitated short course Staff from NAMCOL, National Institute for Educational Development, part-time online content developers, Senior Education Officers (36M/57F) 24 certificates awarded
Learning Design for Online Course Provision leading to Sensitisation for Course Development using OER (LDD)	July-Sept 2021- 26 participants NAMCOL Tertiary Program Tutor Markers (10M/16F) 15 certificates awarded
Facilitating Online Learning (FOL) short course	May-June 2021 - 29 participants NAMCOL Tertiary, Secondary, TVET & Ministry (15M/14F) 10 certificates awarded
Moodle Orientation Course for Content Developers	Ongoing in 2022
Student Moodle Orientation	Ongoing in 2022

Participant Reflections and Evaluation

Stage 1 Webinar Series participants were required to reflect weekly on what they had learned although many participants did not complete this activity.

Insights from the Stage 1 weekly SADC-CDE reflections included:

- Appreciation for the variety of institutions taking part sharing their different knowledge, promoting cross-institutional learning and networking.
- Good timing in the current pandemic situation enabling gearing up for more online interaction, and alignment with institutional strategic planning.
- Awareness of the potential of online T&L and what the contextual challenges are.
- New awareness of changing roles when moving online.
- Appreciation of the role of learning design and its constituent elements such as storyboarding.
- Interest in structured activity design and balance of activity types.
- New understanding of the potential of using OER.

Insights from the WASR-RETRIDOL reflections (and consultant observation) included:

- This group had high expectations and appeared very well prepared to undertake their involvement.
- Participants who undertook this activity appeared to have internalised what had been discussed each week.

- Storyboarding was well-received. Many participants were already working in a structured environment, and understood where storyboarding fitted in.
- The resource audit was also well-received; and combined with searching for OER, it opened up new ways of selecting and collating course resources.
- Interest in structured activity design and balancing activity types was significant.

In addition to the weekly participant learning reflections during Stage 1, at the conclusion of each Webinar series, the final activity was for the participants from each cohort to reflect on their experiences via an adapted Brookfield critical incident questionnaire. Unfortunately, SADC-CDE respondents numbered only 15 (of 39) and only 8 (also of 39) responses were received from the WASR participants.

Insights from the SADC-CDE and WASR-RETRIDOL cohorts' Critical Incident reflections (surveys) included (Mallinson, 2021):

- Participants enjoyed the live-conferencing interaction despite the sporadic internet challenges.
- Participants enjoyed the live-conferencing flow into the related activities on Moodle.
- Challenges were experienced in completing the number of activities (SADC-CDE).
- Synchronous group work was affirming, as was when other participants responded to a forum post.
- The OER topic & Creative Commons licencing was a revelation to some participants.
- Some participants felt distanced when undertaking the asynchronous activities. (WASR)
- Sharing information between participants was valued, both during the live sessions and in the forums when insights were shared, and contributions were acknowledged.

These insights were largely echoed by NAMCOL participants when the LDD Webinar Series was repurposed and propagated (NAMCOL, 2022).

Reflection:

National Ministerial and Institutional collaborations have proved useful in sharing training, expertise, and resources at both NAMCOL and LDTC. It is anticipated that cross-institutional sharing of courses, resources, and training will take place regionally at institutions. NAMCOL and BOU have a fair amount of previous collaboration prior experience on which to build.

COS/BOU reflected that institutional participation in this project has brought to reality long-envisioned dreams of making education more accessible to as many citizens as possible country-wide by means of Technology-enabled teaching and learning (TEL). It is thought that this will motivate the university to refocus and rethink their support models and resources regarding the digitisation of study materials. For this institution, participation marks in a limited way the implementation of the Strategy for Technology Enhanced Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Student Support (STELTASS), and has redressed the previous institutional practice of support of the use of technology in processes and services being skewed towards tertiary programmes rather than Open Schooling.

Time constraints were mentioned as inhibiting factors by all and given the current pandemic and work pressures in the education sector it has been extremely difficult for all participants and liaison persons to sustain their involvement in the project activities. When revising materials between cohort 1 and 2, the synchronous sessions were reduced from 2 to 1.5 hours and the asynchronous activity was reduced from 4.5 to 2.5 hours per topic. Time pressures were also alleviated somewhat by the mid-series break implemented in the 2nd cohort. Despite much time and effort being put into implementing the refined Action Plans, the deadlines have shifted into 2022 due to the pandemic and staff availability.

Motivation to persevere was an issue for the WASR cohort, and despite continued efforts by the COL liaison and COL consultant, this resulted in a lower Stage 1 certification rate. For both cohorts, incentives for participation were limited to certification, and further institutional incentives could be considered going forward.

Concluding Remarks:

Access to an LMS is an important part of teaching and learning during this time of the global pandemic and going forward to preserve the group educational experience. Sharing a hosted LMS requires good access at all levels and further sensitization is essential for institutional staff and students (LDTC). For the WASR cohort, the LMS provided by RETRIDOL as a regional centre of TEL and OER expertise was ideal for this purpose.

The practise of capacitating institutional staff with respect to enhancing their educational technology skills worked well and positioned identified champions to in turn capacitate others at their institutions, although that was subject to the time pressures mentioned above.

Recommendations for sustaining TEL at these institutions could include the deployment of Learning Circles (P2PU, 2015) to support both staff and students new to teaching and learning online, as well as reuse / adaptation of other useful OER such as the Saide (2012) Online course Evaluation Instrument developed for the

PHEA-ETI multi-year project. In addition, the processes and materials used in this COL project are all available for further reuse, revision, remixing, and redistribution.

It has been a privilege for the author to undertake this learning journey together with COL, the regional organisations (SADC-CDE and RETRIDOL), the partner institutions, the champions acknowledged below, and the many project participants. The process of working with the COL liaison and the regional organisations from project conceptualisation through capacity-building via the Webinar Series, support for refining the draft Action Plans, and finally being involved in many of the implementation activities has been a highly enriching experience for the consultant. Existing relationships were built upon, new cross-institutional and cross-border connections were made by participants, and networks have been developed that could be used in the future to great effect in this context where practise continues to evolve in the area of Educational Technology and OER.

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