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# 2021 Envisioning Report

For Empowering Universities



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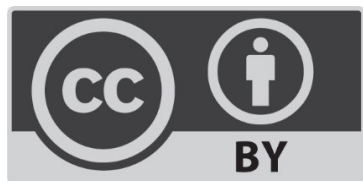
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# **AMED - Towards a dual-mode university: Co-design of a short learning program for capacity building**

## **Innovative impact**

This contribution presents an overview of the process of design and development of a contextualized and tailor-made short learning program (SLP) (Maina et al., 2019) as part of a strategy leading to the institutional digital transformation of the Maldives National University (MNU). The program is targeted at the professional development of lecturers and senior level staff with the main purpose of training them in key aspects regarding the transformation of the university towards a bimodal model, thus implementing blended learning as a pivotal strategic approach for the institution.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, and particularly during the COVID-19 global pandemic, the different modes in which higher level education is delivered has sparked much debate. Our new normal of social distancing highlights the urgent need to ensure that all students have access to quality education anywhere in the world at any time. However, this is no easy feat given the societal pressure that expects universities to provide said quality education and meet the needs of students while remaining innovative, affordable, cost-effective and relevant (Damewood, 2016). Although advances in technology have generated the “digital disruption of education” (De Wit et al., 2016, p. 77), higher education institutions face many challenges in terms of the societal and economic limitations to implement the use of technologies (Posselt et al., 2018). These limitations have been identified in countries such as the Maldives, which presents key issues for the implementation of online and distance education involving the technological infrastructure and policies but also the need to offer upskilling opportunities to academic staff (World Bank Report, 2016). In addition, the supply of more flexible and accessible learning in Maldives also responds to the challenge of overcoming the dispersed geography of the country and the demand of equal and better opportunities for lifelong learning within the post-secondary population distributed across the islands.

This contribution builds on the AMED Erasmus+ capacity building project aiming at supporting the modernisation, accessibility and internationalisation of higher education in Maldives. The approach focuses on the professional development of MNU staff for the introduction of blended-learning as a core feature of the curriculum. A tailor-made learning program and a local institutional framework supporting its long-term sustainable implementation were designed for this purpose.

## **Understanding the needs for the learning program**

The design process began with a comprehensive training needs analysis targeting student, lecturer and institutional readiness for digital learning. It was carried out through key interviews conducted during the kick off-meeting to investigate administrative, managerial and strategic issues regarding an e-learning organizational strategy implementation with the Dean of Students, The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the Quality Assurance Controller, and the Registrar.

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Additionally, a focus group with six lecturers from different Faculties and a focus group and a meeting with the CETE team (MNU center for teaching support) were also led with the purpose to gain insights into faculty e-learning readiness and training needs. Two questionnaires were validated during the kick-off and distributed later on to MNU lecturers and students to develop e-learning maturity profiles.

The results established a clear and accurate portrait of the situation of the university and the corresponding lecturers and senior-level staff training needs. An in-depth analysis of these findings provided enough information to design and develop the SLP curriculum.

For each training need a set of topics was identified and organized into a thematic concept map used as the basis for the design phase. As a result, the SLP was organized around four modules and two capstone projects divided into two pathways, for lecturers and for senior-level decision-makers, as follows:

- "Foundations of e-learning" (common to all)
- "Leadership and management of e-learning" (senior level)
- "Designing digital learning" (lecturers)
- "The networked teacher" (lecturers)
- "Capstone project" (one per profile)

Capstone projects build on the hands-on modules, extending the initiated tasks. The lecturer's capstone project delves into the design, development, and prototyping of a blended sequence or course. Senior level staff is oriented towards the development of a Faculty/institutional blended learning implementation action plan.

Discussion, interviews and focus groups with MNU representatives also revealed the need for creating a learning programme that would adapt to lecturers and senior-level staff schedules in terms of workload and flexibility. It was also established that each module would have 2.5 MNU credits, which correspond to 25 hours of work. Capstones projects were assigned 50 hours for senior level staff and 75 hours for lecturers.

## Co-designing the AMED SLP

A co-design process was led by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) with the close participation of the other three partners (FOI and CARNET from Croatia, and MNU). The co-design adopted the primary design approach of starting from scratch and combined cooperative and collaborative work (Maina et al., 2020). As such, the development of each module was assigned to a module leader and a main contributor pertaining to different partner institutions. The peer design process undertaken to work on the assigned module was led through online co-designers working meetings organized according to emerging needs and left to the discretion of each co-design pair. The latest progression of their work was then submitted to a third partner institution which was assigned the role of reviewer and provided feedback on the work done. A set of design templates scaffolded the whole process.

The independent cooperation of every co-designer pair in the development of their module was combined with monthly group online meetings attended by all the members of the design team. These regular meetings were scheduled to discuss the design of the modules (description, topics, competences and learning outcomes, activities, resources, assessment and environment), ensure their coherence and

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AMED - Advancing higher education in Maldives through E-learning Development", is funded by Erasmus+ programme - KA2 Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practice, Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education

dynamism, and avoid duplication of contents and activities (Maina et al., 2020).

Moreover, a protocol to structure the work dynamics for the co-creation of the SLP was set up by UOC envisaging all the issues to be tackled in the group online meetings. Among them were a) the assignment of roles (lead, contributor and reviewer), b) the discussion of the first draft of the topics, competences, learning outcomes and description of each module, c) the refinement of the content and style, d) the elaboration of guidance targeted to the facilitators of the program, e) the consolidation of the module design and, f) the implementation of the final modifications after the review of the partners and the relevant target group representatives. Capstone projects were directly connected to the modules and had to be designed in parallel with them. The role of the coordinator of the SLP design was to ensure progress and macro and micro design alignment. As such, UOC closely followed the entire process and elaborated a specific document to gather the progress in the design of each module's elements (description, topics, competences and learning outcomes, activities, resources, assessment and environment), thus enabling partners to check it against their expected achievements.

In addition, the coherence of each module with its learning path was reviewed by UOC which also worked to harmonise competences and learning outcomes and avoid dissonance in the design. The macro-design related to the complete educational strategy, the program's structure, the quality and the final credentialization, therefore, was increasingly aligned with the micro-design of its constituents. To make this objective possible, UOC also recommended that each module leader monitor possible overlap of topics, competencies, learning outcomes and content with other modules during the design phase, refining their content accordingly.

The result of this co-design process led to the deployment of the AMED e-Learning Study Programme which is currently being piloted at the Maldives National University with 75 lecturers and decision-makers.

## Conclusion

This contribution presented the process of co-design of the AMED Study Program which involved a group of partners in a cooperative and collaborative development endeavour. The aforementioned process relied on a strategy that combined the co-design of the single learning blocks with monthly group online meetings to set common key milestones to be followed. The learning program which was developed and designed during this co-design process provides an outline of a potential sustainable e-learning model that could be rolled out across the Maldives. As such, this would contribute to the overall educational transformation towards a dual-mode university with the aim to provide quality higher education for those where until now it has not been possible.



## Contributing Institutions

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Anadolu University | Turkey  
Dublin City University | Ireland  
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FernUniversität in Hagen | Germany  
Hellenic Open University | Greece  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology | Norway  
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