

Research Summary Report

What are professional development needs for online instructors in continuing education?

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Abstract

This CAUCE funded study explores online instructors' perceptions about their needs for future professional development (PD) in their practice in the continuing education (CE) context. The project adopted a mixed-methods approach and data collection was carried out through a semi-structured online survey.

The findings highlight that although the vast majority of online instructors participated in PD opportunities for online teaching, more than half did not use third party technologies in their teaching due to lack of knowledge or training.

Challenges encountered in online teaching include lack of communication with learners, the time needed to address online learning issues, learner engagement, and technology-related issues. Online instructors' needs ranged from general pedagogical, technology, and administrative support, to support with specific issues, such as a handbook for the use of the learning management system, sample content to be used as reference, assessment, creation, and incorporation of multimedia content, or assistance with the incorporation of open educational resource materials. There were mixed responses about PD opportunities. The majority believed that PD opportunities available did indeed address their needs. In contrast, over two-fifths thought that they would benefit from alternative PD opportunities to those available, citing as reasons their unavailability for attendance of online learning professional development classes on campus, teaching a technical course, or no need due to effective onboarding.

Findings indicate that for a significant minority of continuing education online instructors, their specific needs may benefit from alternative PD opportunities, such as the promotion of more targeted PD training, and higher investment in educational technology tools, but also through an increased outreach about the availability, and accessibility of existing support at the organization.

1. Introduction: Clear statement of objectives

1.1 Purpose

The goal of this exploratory, semi-structured research was to gather more information about what online instructors¹ in the continuing education context identify as needs for future professional development (PD) in their practice. Data collected and analyzed from this research may inform future plans for revising and enhancing existing PD materials.

1.2 Background

PD for online instructors is critical for any institution as it impacts students' learning experiences and online instructors' performance with regard to course delivery. However, the majority of PD offerings focus on simply addressing pedagogical or technological issues. This creates a disconnect between the purpose and pedagogical benefits of using technological tools for learning.

Aiming to address this issue, The G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University conducted a needs assessment among online instructors to gather feedback about their experience and perceived challenges about teaching online courses (Chang School, 2013). The needs assessment showed that available online instructor training programs focused mostly on technology, were short-term, and not in an online format to facilitate the participation of all interested online instructors due to schedule constraints. Based on this feedback and following effective practices for online teaching, a PD program called Teaching Adult Learners Online (TALO)² was developed in 2014. TALO is open to all teaching staff working at Ryerson University regardless of status (i.e. tenured, non-tenured faculty, contract, continuing education), and is anchored on The Chang School's expectations for effective online teaching.

1.3 Objective

Currently, postsecondary education is undergoing rapid changes, and consequently, these changes are presently not captured, nor addressed by TALO. Specifically, the needs and wants of the student body are changing, calling for engaging and inquisitive learning (Bates, 2014).

¹ The term "online instructor" refers to educators teaching online and includes contract and full-time lecturers, tenure and non-tenured faculty and any other teaching role involved in online learning. Hereafter, "online instructor" will be the preferred term, except where specific references are made to an educator's employment status.

² TALO is a 5 module online course that focuses on integrating pedagogy and technology in teaching and learning. It is designed to support skill development and enhancement in five core areas: instructor presence, timely feedback, clear communication, fostering a learning community, and effective course management. Although the program is not mandatory for online instructors, it has been exceptionally successful and participants continuously provide positive feedback about their experience. Based on continuous feedback and developments in the field of online teaching and learning, changes and enhancements have been made to the TALO curriculum over the years.

Additionally, the pool of instructors at Ryerson University, as well as their professional needs are changing.

While it is evidenced that TALO has been highly successful, after 5 years, we explored online instructors' perceptions about their current PD needs for teaching and learning, with a focus on administration-related tasks, pedagogical support, and support on the use of educational technology, in order to support instructors with course management, communication, and empowerment of students as co-creators of knowledge and fostering of Open Educational Practices.

1.4 Research question

What are the current perceptions of online continuing education instructors regarding their needs for continuous professional development training?

1.5 Significance

Identifying and developing such PD opportunities will allow online instructors to be highly equipped and competent to tackle pedagogical, technological and administrative issues. With the knowledge and experience gained, online instructors will be able to successfully facilitate quality learning experiences for students who expect highly engaging courses and programs, and use technological tools to support social connections and applied learning. Finally, the impact of our proposed project expands beyond the teaching community of Ryerson University, as many of our online instructors teach at two or more institutions or may be pursuing full time teaching positions elsewhere.

2. Literature background

Within the context of lifelong learning, major emphasis has been placed on PD for faculty and instructors in postsecondary education, mainly focusing on keeping up-to-date with subject specialism, at a time that is marked by major changes due to rapid technological advances. While we were not able to identify research directly related to continuing education instructors, we were able to identify common needs and gaps in PD for effective online teaching that benefits all teaching staff.

According to the 2019 CNSODL, online learning continues to steadily increase in Canadian public post-secondary education. In their national survey on online learning they found that in 2018-2019, online enrolment grew by 10% annually in universities, and also, 71% of the surveyed institutions in 2019 expect online enrolments to increase in 2020 (Johnson et al., 2019). Additionally, they identified training and support for faculty in the delivery of online learning as central to overcoming the barrier for adoption of online education (Johnson et al., 2019; see also CDLRA, 2019).

Similarly, a recent survey about faculty attitudes on technology, conducted by InsideHigherEd & Gallup (2019), shows an increase in the proportion of faculty members teaching online courses from the previous year, and significant growth in that number compared to 2013 (46 percent up from 30 percent) (p.10).

Furthermore, online learning has created opportunities for experimenting with new pedagogical approaches, and it has been demonstrated that teaching online courses helps online instructors to develop pedagogical skills and practices that improve teaching overall (Inside Higher Ed & Gallup, 2019).

Recognizing the need for PD for their faculty and instructors teaching online, many institutions design and offer programs and workshops that focus on addressing pedagogical and technological considerations. However, these two components seem to be mostly addressed separately, therefore creating a disconnect between the purpose and pedagogical benefits of using technological tools for learning.

Johnson et al., (2019) have shown that most of PD for faculty in Canadian postsecondary education institutions is available on a voluntary basis, instead of being integrated into institutional strategies in postsecondary education institutions. Also, Berry (2018) found that faculty involved in distance education, “*desired more professional development in the area of online pedagogy*” (p.121). Additionally, faculty members stated that existing PD was failing to help them adapt their teaching to the online environment (p.123).

Phelps (2018) argues that faculty development needs to be anchored in a growth mindset and viewed from the perspective of enhancing student learning and serving the entire campus community. In addition, she points to the importance of consulting with colleagues and to the need to listen to faculty concerns.

The role and involvement of faculty and instructors in shaping that PD to meet their needs cannot be emphasized enough, because “*when faculty members believe that there is strong organizational support around their needs, they tend to identify more with shared goals and become more involved in the process*” (Scott et al., 2016, in Coswatte Mohr & Shelton, 2017, p.135). Hence, organizationally supported and directed PD opportunities may also lead to the empowerment and higher involvement of online instructors in organizational shared goals.

3. Methodology

The study follows a semi-structured research design that explored participants' perceptions on their continuous PD needs, aiming to identify and address emerging pedagogical, administrative and technological changes and student expectations. The project included 270 participants (TALO graduates) and achieved a response rate of 27.9 per cent.

Data were collected through a semi-structured online survey, which was distributed through the online software tool Opinio, to the Chang School's Continuing Education Contract Lecturers at Ryerson University, based on their past participation in TALO. Data collection took place from January to March 2020. Ethical approval was sought through Ryerson's Research Ethics Board. Data analysis focused on describing trends and identifying themes in open-ended questions. The software SPSS v.24 and NVivo v.12 was used for data analysis.

4. Findings

4.1 Use of learning technologies

Out of 66 research participants, 65 (98.5%) reported having taken PD for online teaching and learning. Also, almost half (32, 39.2%, N=65) reported having taught online for 4 years or more, 19 (21.5%) for less than a year, and 14 (43.3%) for 1 to 3 years.

When asked if they used any third party technology in their teaching, more than half (34, 56.7%, N=65) reported to not have used them either because of lack of knowledge, or lack of training. From the 26 (43.3%) who reported to have used third party technology, many said to use learning management systems, such as D2L or Canvas, and videos from YouTube and elsewhere. Polling tools were also mentioned by a few, as well as publisher and library resources. Regarding synchronous learning, a few reported using *Adobe Connect* and *Join.me*.

4.2 Challenges

When asked about challenges encountered in online teaching, participants pointed to several issues experienced.

4.2.1 Communication

The lack of communication in asynchronous online learning programs was identified as a major challenge, as well as the lack of communication between learners in discussion forums.

Reference was made to difficulties to connect with learners and their participation in online discussions. As one participant explained:

“The isolation that the students feel and how to make it better for them. I would like them to feel a live classroom like experience.”

Regarding participation in discussion forums, the challenge to enable learners to share their thoughts and experiences was pointed out: “*Unless there are grades assigned, they rarely use the discussion board functionality to build community, even when we, as instructors, encourage them and post content there*”.

A further challenge was the inability to assess learning content comprehension due to lack of face-to-face interaction, which in turn may affect learning success: *“I often feel like some students struggle in silence with the main material until it's too late.”*

Moreover, face-to-face interaction was referred to as a tactic for building rapport between instructor and learner, and the lack of it in asynchronous learning: *“seeing individuals in-person allows an instructor to see body language etc. which provide valuable clues as to the students' grasp of the material”*. Similarly, another instructor saw the lack of face-to-face interaction due to time difference as a weakness of asynchronous learning.

Lastly, the lack of spontaneity and fast interactive questioning in classroom settings that help solidify learning were identified as challenges of online learning.

4.2.2 Time

For many online instructors the time spent to produce resources to support students, as well as time needed for addressing student issues at individual level, such as responding to online posts or providing feedback, in an asynchronous online learning environment was perceived as a major challenge. Specific references were made to challenges associated with asynchronous learning, especially in a postgraduate online learning context:

“As most communication is text-based and asynchronous, everything takes longer than it would in face-to-face instruction. Some idea, which I convey in a minute or so face-to-face, will take two to three times longer online because you have to type, check what has been written for clarity and then send it. This is time consuming. Even the act of downloading assignments, grading them and uploading, is time consuming especially when class sizes are above 40 students.”

A further problem associated with time is the fact that compensation for time input is disproportionate:

“Everything I said in my [...] class had to be written down in nice paragraphs. Total about 50,000 words. The pay for doing this was \$7,000, or less than \$30/hour. No amount of "professional development" will overcome this basic disincentive to invest even more time in a financially unattractive activity.”

Hence, time raises the issue of finding effective time management strategies while maintaining the quality and input of online teaching, as well as demotivation of instructors due to the lack of effort-appropriate compensation.

4.2.3 Technology-related issues

A few online instructors also referred to technology-related challenges related to online learning, such as not knowing about, and the need to familiarize with online learning tools, unexpected technical difficulties and glitches, and the need for “*tools to assist in engaging students through discussions*”. As a result, some online instructors may “*feel disconnected from the University. It would be nice if there were online resources to refer to... or if these exist, knowing where they are*”.

4.2.4 Engagement

One of the more pertinent challenges encountered include student engagement and participation. Specifically, reference was made to the challenge of creating continuous student engagement, and the need of tools for, and assessing engagement, due to the nature of online learning. As one participant pointed out:

“In the absence of a classroom dynamic, the biggest challenge to teaching online is ensuring that students have the opportunity to engage with each. The online environment simply can't replace an engaging, and thoughtful in-class discussion.”

Also, instructor engagement was perceived as a challenge, and one participant identified as a challenge the “*engagement without participation as a graded component*”.

4.2.5 Professional development opportunities

When asked if the provision of PD was addressing current needs, online instructors showed mixed responses. Out of 56, 30 (53.6%) said that PD opportunities available did indeed address their needs, while 26 (46.4%) believed they could benefit from alternative PD opportunities.

Those who reported that PD provision was addressing their current needs, indicated that they were receiving one-to-one support from the university on using the learning management system, tools and advice on how to use open educational resources. Also, many reported being provided with PD opportunities from the university, such as D2L tutorials. One mentioned to have received excellent “*suggestions for innovative instructional strategies when developing courses*”, while another praised the effectiveness of the TALO course: “*This course was fabulous and one I felt all teachers online would benefit from taking as it reviewed pedagogy*”.

Those who felt to benefit from alternative PD opportunities, cited as reasons non availability to attend online learning PD classes on campus, teaching a technical course, or no need due to effective onboarding. One online instructor explained that there was indirect support from management to attend online learning PD events because of no online provision in the department. Also, another instructor pointed to the lack of “*participation of contract lecturers in collective planning meetings in their areas. This would enable instructors to see how their*

courses fit into broader goals, as well it would enable the exchange experiences with other instructors from similar areas”.

Furthermore, a significant number of online instructors expressed the need for PD opportunities for online teaching and learning. Online instructors’ needs ranged from general pedagogical, technology and administrative support, to support with specific issues, such as a handbook for the use of the LMS, sample content to be used as reference, assessment, creation and incorporation of multimedia content, or assistance with incorporation of OER materials. Interestingly, a few online instructors wanted more support with methods and strategies to increase student engagement. Lastly, there were calls to have ongoing, mid-course support as many PD opportunities were offered before a course started:

“I think there is a lot of development up front, but not necessarily after the course has been developed. For example, after teaching a semester, there might be ways to improve the course, but it doesn't seem like that's available or known to be available if it is”.

Other issues raised by participants include the reliance on the support of others (e.g. instructional designers) to design a course, although a subject matter expert can envision what they want their course to "look like"; information about the functionality of online tools not shared before one uses these: *“For example, I was encouraged to use a test bank, yet it was only after the test that I found out that I would not be able to retrieve statistics about the test questions.”* Lastly, positive remarks were made about receiving information for effective practices from colleagues, hence praising *collegiality*.

4.3 Top 3 priorities for online teaching- support needed for these

For online instructors, the top three priorities for online teaching fell into the categories of online pedagogy, online learning management and technology related issues for online teaching.

Regarding technology for teaching, many reported the need for more training on how to use existing technologies for specific needs, such as using technology effectively for student engagement, participation and communication in the online learning environment.

About the wider time and workload management in online teaching, issues of limited time availability and resources were raised: more time was needed to learn and use technologies, to prepare effective materials and lessons, for student teacher interaction. With reference to resources, many mentioned that they were underpaid for the workload involved.

There was also a need for improvements with LMS, use of OERs and videos, and other techniques to improve online learning.

Many participants believed that the combination of improvements in online pedagogy and technology, with updating of PD opportunities for management of online learning would lead to

increased engagement, participation and communication in the online learning environment (image 1).

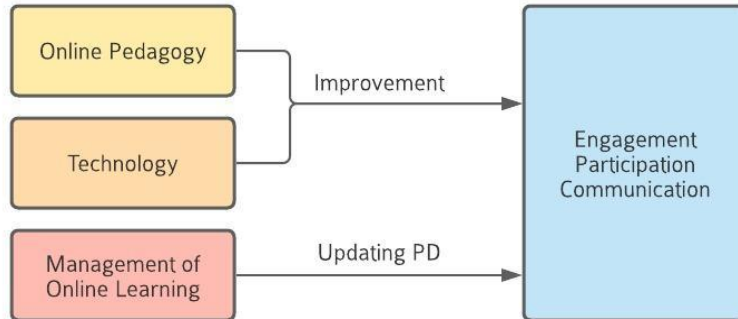


Image 1: Top 3 priorities for online learning

Furthermore, participants identified as top priorities for their PD as strategies for increasing student engagement, more pedagogical online approaches and instructional strategies, the need to stay updated about technologies online and the optimal use of current technologies and tools, and more cost-effective time management strategies that leave room for quality teaching, and interaction with students.

For the achievement of these priorities, participants believed that they needed support with technology-related issues (such as dealing with broken links, user handbooks for LMS, use of OERs, embedding AODA standards into online content), availability of workshops and webinars where new technologies are presented, online resources that can act as a knowledge base, and a strong community of practice where information sharing amongst colleagues and researchers on online pedagogy are openly shared and discussed.

4.4 Student engagement

When asked what skills would help better support student engagement in online learning, the facilitation of student content – interaction was viewed as the most needed skill (42, $N= 53$, see multiple response figure below), followed by student – student interaction (40), and student – instructor interaction (34).

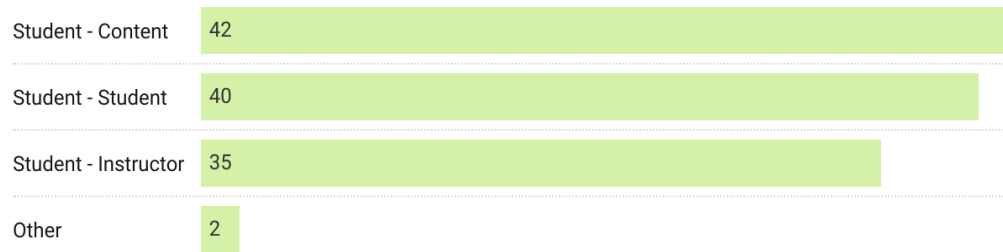


Figure 1: Skills supporting student engagement in online learning

Additional comments included teaching assistant support, student comprehension skills, online discussion support, and contact with the outside world.

When asked how the skills identified would help them engage students in online learning, most participants believed that they could achieve engagement through increased retention, comprehension, shared knowledge, and one-to-one interaction. Specifically, reference was made to the absence of an online learning community that would mirror the one emerging in the classroom. Due to the absence of such a community, many believed that the current offerings lacked diversity, lack of interaction with each other, and anonymity, which will eventually lead to disengagement. In one’s words: *“Well you can take a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. Online, I’m not able to see the “Aha” moment which is clear in the classroom.”* Similar views were expressed by others about instructor – student interaction:

“I hold a lot of online office hours and that really makes a real difference for both the student and for my experience of the course but that’s only true for the “regulars” who attend those. The majority don’t have any interaction with me in a term.”

Lastly, regarding engagement with content, most participants believed that students did engage adequately with the content; however, the content was *“static”*, and could be improved if it is presented in an *“intuitive way”*.

4.5 Online assessment

When asked about what support would help in the design of effective online assessment, participants reported to need support with pedagogical approaches specific to online assessment (39, $N=53$, see multiple response figure below), followed by technical support for use of tools (38), and configuration of the online environment (24). Other identified needs for designing effective online assessment included help with animations, exam online proctoring and updating LMS to allow for more manageable discussion boards: *“I also give marks for participation in*

discussion boards. But the technology (D2L) does not help this. It is impossible to see easily whether a student has participated in a discussion board, and if so what they said.”

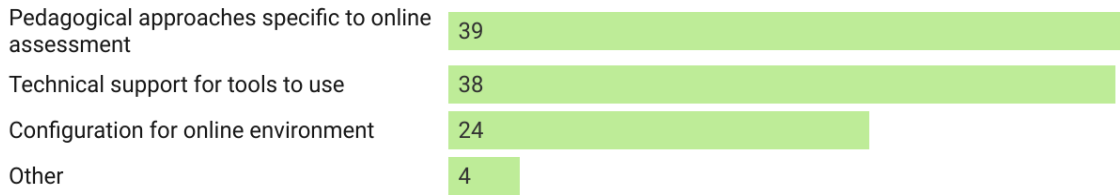


Figure 2: Need for support with pedagogical approaches specific to online learning

Participants felt that technical support for online assessment would be beneficial for both, themselves, and their students, because additional support for online assessment would reduce workload and increase efficiency, which in turn could help them adopt efficient time management strategies. Some also believed that greater online assessment support would help them adapt existing learning materials and improve assessment processes.

4.6 Preferred format of professional development for online teaching

Participants indicated that their preferred format of PD for online teaching was a facilitated and asynchronous, fully online support (34, N=51, see multiple response figure below), followed by in-person synchronous sessions (28), and webinars (26).

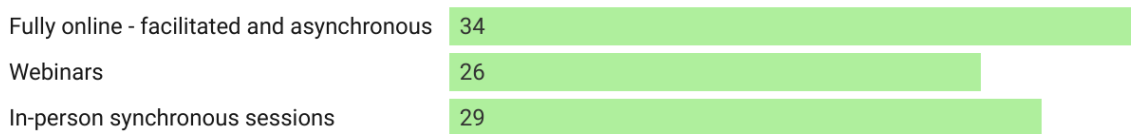


Figure 3: Preferred format of PD for online teaching

Participants also expressed an interest in a mixture of both, online and in person PD, for reasons of online exposure and more intimate, individual support. Issues that may affect in-person PD identified include limited time and geographical location.

5. Discussion and limitations

The goal of this study was to explore online instructors’ perceptions about their needs for future PD in their practice in the continuing education context. The project was based on mixed methods and data were collected through a semi-structured online survey.

Findings indicate that although the vast majority (98.5%) did participate in PD opportunities for online teaching, more than half (56.7%) were not using third party technologies in their teaching due to the lack of knowledge or training.

Participants pointed to a number of challenges encountered in online teaching, such as lack of communication with learners, time needed to address online learning issues, technology-related issues (e.g. use of learning tools, unexpected technical difficulties and glitches), and learner engagement. Their needs ranged from general pedagogical, technology and administrative support, to support with specific issues, such as a handbook for the use of the learning management system, sample content to be used as reference, assessment, creation and incorporation of multimedia content, or assistance with incorporation of open educational resource materials.

Respondents showed mixed responses about PD opportunities: over half (53.6%) said that PD opportunities available did indeed address their needs, while over two fifths (46.4%) they could benefit from alternative PD opportunities that fit their professional circumstances. Those who reported that PD provision was addressing their current needs, indicated that they were receiving one-to-one support from the university on using the learning management system, tools, and advice on how to use open educational resources. Those who felt to benefit from alternative PD opportunities, cited as reasons non-availability to attend online learning PD classes on campus, teaching a technical course, or simply, no need due to effective onboarding.

Needs that were raised included finding effective time management strategies, the replication of the classroom experience in asynchronous learning through tools to engage students in discussions, continuous engagement and its assessment, and increased student - student, as well as student - instructor interaction, as well as the creation of a community of online learning. More targeted PD training, higher investment in educational technology tools, and increased outreach about the availability, and accessibility of existing organizational support at the organization may allow postsecondary institutions to further support online instructors' PD needs.

5.1 Limitations

The limitation of this study is its focus on one group of online instructors at a postsecondary institution. A comparison with online instructors who have not participated in the TALO program may uncover different perceptions of challenges and PD needs. Lastly, an ethnographic, in-depth, follow-up study examining the extent to which the suggested priorities may solve their perceived challenges which increase our understanding of how the wider structural issues in remote learning affect online teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

The study showed that for a large cohort of continuing education online instructors felt that their PD needs were adequately addressed, and believed that the TALO course prepared to effectively teach online. However, a significant minority felt that their specific needs were not being adequately addressed. While technology support, management of online learning and online pedagogy were seen by online instructors as visible, functional challenges, student engagement, participation, and communication issues were perceived as the underlying structural challenges they were encountering. Hence, while the majority of continuing education online instructors' PD needs are met, a significant minority may benefit from alternative PD opportunities, such as the promotion of more targeted PD training, and higher investment in educational technology tools, but also through an increased outreach about the availability, and accessibility of existing support at the organization.

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Appendix: Questionnaire to be used in online survey:

1. Have you taken any professional development for online teaching and learning?
2. How long have you been teaching online?
 - a) Less than 1 year
 - b) 1 - 3
 - c) 4 +
3. Do you currently employ 3rd party technology in your online course? (e.g. polling tools, apps, publisher resources)
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

Please explain your choice: _____

4. What do you find most challenging about online teaching and why?
5. Do you feel you are provided with adequate professional development opportunities that address your current needs? (subject expertise, administration related tasks, pedagogical support, support on using educational technology)
 - a) Yes, please specify
 - b) No, please list where the gaps are
6. What would you consider as the top three priorities for your professional development for online teaching?
 - a) For each of the priorities you have identified, please provide what support would be most helpful for you and why.
7. What skills would help you to better support student engagement in online learning? Select all that apply!
 - a) Facilitating:
 - i) student to student interaction
 - ii) student-instructor interaction
 - iii) student-content interaction
 - iv) Other - please state _____

b) How will this help you to support student engagement in online learning?

8. What support would help you to design effective online assessments?
- a) pedagogical approaches specific to online
 - b) technical support for tools to use
 - c) configuration for online environment
 - d) Other - please state _____
- e) How will this help you to support you to design effective online assessment?
9. What technical support do you need for online assessment and grading? (e.g. quizzes, discussions, eportfolios etc.)
10. How will this help you to support you to design effective online assessment?
11. What is your preferred format for professional development for online teaching?
- a) fully online - facilitated and asynchronous
 - b) Webinars
 - c) In-person synchronous sessions
 - d) Other - please state _____
12. What support would help you to enhance your presence in your online course teaching?
- a) video
 - b) discussion moderation
 - c) other multimedia tools such as _____
 - d) Other - please state _____
13. Is receiving a credential important for your professional development?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
- Please explain your choice:
14. What else would you like to suggest in terms of support for your professional development?