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Exploring Instructor Experiences with an E-Module for Online Teaching: A Qualitative Case from Maldives Higher Education

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Abstract

The shift to online and blended teaching in higher education has increased the demand for effective professional development (PD) that supports instructors in adapting to digital environments. This study explores the experiences of faculty members at a university in the Maldives who participated in a custom-designed e-module for online teaching. The research investigates whether such PD can enhance teaching readiness and identifies support factors contributing to its success. Guided by Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the study adopts a qualitative, constructivist approach using focus group discussions with purposively sampled participants. Thematic analysis of participants' feedback reveals key insights into the module's design, ease of use, interactivity, and the role of peer and institutional support. Findings indicate the potential of well-supported online PD to improve instructional practice, though challenges in independent application remain. Recommendations for hybrid delivery models and enhanced facilitation are discussed.

Keywords Online professional development; Technology-enabled learning; Technology acceptance and use

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has made online and blended learning integral to higher education worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, accelerated this shift, compelling educators to adapt rapidly to online teaching and learning platforms and methodologies (Senapati & Malakar, 2024; Mosleh et al., 2024). This evolution has altered instructors' roles and practices (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Rasheed et al., 2020). However, despite the increasing adoption of technology in higher education, instructors often struggle to integrate new technologies into their teaching due to a lack of necessary skills and competences, resulting in slower-than-expected innovation in teaching practices (Sutton, 2017; Dysart & Weckerle, 2015; Haywood et al., 2015). This issue underscores the urgent need for ongoing professional development (PD) and training to enable instructors to adapt to these changes and improve student learning outcomes (Kumar et al., 2019). Traditional in-person, campus-based PD opportunities are insufficient to meet these evolving needs (Martin et al., 2019).

Post-Covid 19, instructor PD has been increasingly offered through e-learning platforms, which have demonstrated effectiveness, such as the use of blended learning approaches and self-paced online courses to enhance instructors' pedagogical practices (Bhebhe et al., 2023). Despite these advancements, there remains a significant gap in understanding how instructors accept and effectively utilize online PD opportunities. Digital pedagogy now stands as a central focus for higher education institutions, with the need for development of new technological competencies and the evolution of instructor professional development to align with the evolving technologies in education.

There has been a drastic shift in teaching and learning paradigms post the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic educators were required to move from traditional, face-to-face methods to entirely digital formats almost overnight (Bhebe et al., 2023). The crisis highlighted the need for rapid adaptation and revealed both strengths and weaknesses in academic systems. The emergency remote learning situation brought on a paradigm shift in teaching and learning, especially, the need for technological competencies and pedagogical creativity for instructors for student success (Koruga et al., 2023). Additionally, the uncertainty and rapid changes have revealed gaps in existing professional development models, and the need for more flexible PD structures. On-going training and support for instructors in technology adoption and integration are crucial for effective learning and teaching in the post-pandemic era (Thapaliya et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Online Professional Development

The necessity for a shift from traditional face-to-face teaching to online learning as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been largely documented (Bhebe 2023; Thapaliya et al., 2023). As Bhebe

(2023) points out, the sudden transition to digital platforms has compelled instructors to integrate technology pedagogies into their teaching practices. However, many lecturers reported limited experience with these pedagogies prior to the pandemic, which impeded their ability to engage students effectively in remote settings (Thapaliya et al., 2023).

Digital tool adoption in higher education is a multifaceted process that involves both technical and pedagogical hurdles (Anis, 2024). Redstone (2021) discusses the need for structured professional development and support for effective online learning in higher education. In many instances, instructors face a steep learning curve when integrating digital content and new pedagogical models into traditional course structures (Koruga et al., 2023). Senapati and Malakar (2024) highlights the importance of comprehensive training for instructor readiness and competence in online teaching and learning. Their study investigating online teaching preparedness of high education teachers in North-East India identified substantial gaps in faculty training and support in implementing effective online learning.

Institutions have utilised online learning as a means for training instructors, and a study by Alamri (2023) reports that instructors' confidence had a strong correlation with perceived benefits of transitioning to online learning, and professional development was a significant predictor for this. The study also identified professional training as a significant predictor for instructors' intention to use online pedagogies, including strategies and tools, in their practice (Alamri, 2023). Similarly, contextually relevant, need specific training has been identified as significant to instructor willingness to use online tools as well as their increased general positivity towards online learning and teaching (Ilgaz et al., 2023). Furthermore, Bollinger and Halupa (2021) assert that preparation and continued institutional support facilitate increased adoption of online teaching by instructors.

Well-designed online professional development (PD) can be a transformative learning experience for instructors and provide structured, yet flexible context in which educators upskill and adapt to new teaching modalities (Ilgaz et al., 2023). The readiness of faculty for online teaching in higher education is shaped by a variety of factors, including technological competence, prior experience, and demographic variables. Research suggests that while many educators acknowledge the importance of online teaching, their perceived readiness can vary significantly. Faculty members' readiness is closely linked to their technological skills and pedagogical strategies, as highlighted by a study that developed an e-readiness scale emphasizing five essential dimensions for effective online teaching, including technological and content readiness (Kohli et al., 2024). Demographic factors such as gender and age also significantly impact perceptions of readiness. For example, older and female faculty members in India have reported lower readiness levels (Senapati & Malakar, 2024), and in the UAE, female faculty in health colleges have exhibited lower confidence compared to their male

counterparts (Mosleh et al., 2024). Tailored training programs are essential for enhancing faculty preparedness (Ormilla & Ongan, 2024). Despite these insights, some faculty members continue to struggle with the transition to online teaching due to a lack of institutional support and resources, highlighting the need for comprehensive professional development initiatives.

The acceptance and effective design of online professional development (PD) are crucial for enhancing educators' skills and improving student outcomes. Research underlines the necessity of customized online PD experiences that align with educators' needs while incorporating effective design elements. The landscape of faculty development has evolved from an expectation to a necessity, especially in the post-pandemic era, highlighting the demand for high-quality PD programs (Redstone & Luo, 2021). Such programs are essential in enhancing educators' knowledge and skills in online course design, where features like feedback and best practices are pivotal for pedagogical advancement (Redstone & Luo, 2021). Additionally, specific instructional design elements, including the use of systematizing videos versus discussions, play a significant role in teachers' professional growth, particularly for those with varying levels of prior knowledge (Wischgoll & Prediger, 2024). Online courses adopting a constructivist approach create interactive learning environments that improve educators' professional skills (Chitanana, 2022). Holistic course development, integrating professional development into online course design, supports a thorough understanding of digital pedagogy essential for student success (Lloyd et al., 2023).

Theoretical Frameworks: UTAUT and Transformational Learning Theory

This study explored instructors' online professional development experiences through the lens of two theoretical frameworks: the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology, UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003) and Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory. UTAUT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how users adopt and use new technologies. The key constructs of UTAUT include UTAUT identifies four key constructs that influence technology adoption. First, performance expectancy refers to the degree to which instructors believe using a digital tool will enhance their teaching effectiveness. For adoption to occur, these tools must demonstrate clear pedagogical benefits that align with instructors' goals. Second, effort expectancy captures the perceived ease of use - instructors are more likely to adopt technologies they find intuitive and user-friendly, particularly when facing complex digital systems. Third, social influence reflects the impact of peer and institutional expectations; a supportive professional community and leadership endorsement can significantly boost engagement with new tools. Finally, facilitating conditions encompass the organizational infrastructure, including training programs, technical support, and reliable resources that enable successful implementation.

This framework reveals that instructors' willingness to adopt digital tools depends not just on the tools' inherent value, but also on how well institutions address practical challenges. Common barriers such as inadequate training, technical difficulties, and lack of institutional support can severely hinder technology integration if not proactively managed. Professional development programs that strategically address these UTAUT factors - by demonstrating clear benefits, reducing complexity, fostering supportive communities, and providing robust infrastructure - stand the best chance of facilitating meaningful technology adoption in higher education settings. The framework underscores the need for holistic approaches that consider both the technological and human dimensions of digital transformation in teaching.

Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory proposes that adult learning involves a process of critical self-reflection and discourse that leads to a fundamental change in perspective (Mezirow, 1991). This theory is particularly relevant in the context of online PD, where structured reflection activities and dialogic learning are central components (Kitchenham, 2008).

Key aspects of transformational learning include:

- **Critical Reflection:** Encouraging educators to critically assess their established teaching practices and underlying assumptions. This reflective practice can lead to the transformation of teaching beliefs and practices.
- **Dialogic Engagement:** Promoting dialogue among peers to challenge preconceptions and foster a culture of shared learning. Through discussions and collaborative projects, educators can co-create knowledge, engaging with diverse perspectives that enhance their understanding.
- **Perspective Transformation:** The culmination of reflective and interactive processes leads to a shift in the educator's professional perspective, enabling the adoption of new practices and strategies that align with modern educational demands.

Transformational learning is an essential mechanism by which PD programs can facilitate a deep change in instructors' attitudes and behaviours toward digital tools. When paired with the UTAUT framework—particularly that of social influence and facilitating conditions—transformational learning provides a robust approach to overcoming resistance and cultivating a positive digital teaching culture.

Although the trend towards online PD is increasing, some educators still favour traditional methods, suggesting a continued demand for hybrid approaches that accommodate diverse learning preferences. Several studies have explored online PD formats, from self-paced modules to blended models, highlighting factors such as instructional design, feedback mechanisms, and community

support as key to success (Redstone & Luo, 2021; Wischgoll & Prediger, 2024). However, there is limited research on how these models are received in geographically constrained regions such as the Maldives, where traditional PD formats may turn out to be logistically impractical.

This study aims to explore the experiences of university instructors in the Maldives with a newly developed e-module for online teaching. Specifically, it investigates their perceptions of the module's usability, instructional value, and the institutional support provided, in order to inform the design of future professional development initiatives.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative approach rooted in the constructivist paradigm, recognising that individuals make meaning through their personal experiences and social interactions (Patton, 2002). Given the aim of the research is to explore instructors lived experiences with a newly developed e-module for online teaching, this paradigm offered an appropriate lens to understand not just what participants experienced, but how they interpreted those experiences.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study required input from individuals who had directly engaged with the e-module. Seven instructors from a public university in the Maldives took part. All had completed the module prior to the study and brought with them varying degrees of teaching experience, subject expertise, and familiarity with online learning environments. Participants included 5 females and 2 males, with 5 plus years of teaching in the university and across the discipline areas of hospitality, health sciences and education.

The decision to conduct a focus group discussion rather than individual interviews was deliberate. It was intended to encourage participants to build on one another's responses, surface shared concerns, and reflect collectively on their teaching practices. The discussion was held virtually through Google Meet and lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Prior to the session, all participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and provided with a consent form outlining their rights, including confidentiality and voluntary participation. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the process, in line with university research protocols.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to keep the discussion focused, while still allowing room for participants to raise additional points of interest. The guide was framed around four open-ended questions related to their overall experience with the e-module, the impact on their teaching

practices, ease of use, and the nature of institutional support they received during the process. Follow-up prompts were used where needed to encourage deeper reflection and clarify responses.

Instrument

The primary instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview protocol, designed to guide the focus group discussion while leaving space for organic, in-depth responses. The guiding questions were carefully developed to explore key aspects of the participants' experiences with the e-module, including their perceptions of its content, its usability, its relevance to their teaching practices, and the kinds of support they received while engaging with it.

The discussion centred around four main questions:

- How would you describe your overall learning experience with the e-module?
- In what ways, if any, did the e-module influence your approach to online teaching at the university?
- How would you assess the ease of use of the e-module, particularly in the context of using the university's learning management system (LMS)?
- -What forms of support were available to you while using the e-module, and how did they shape your experience?

These questions were shared with participants in advance to allow time for reflection. During the session, the moderator used follow-up prompts where necessary to clarify points, probe deeper into initial responses, or invite participants to share specific examples.

Data Analysis Procedure

Following the focus group discussion, the data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-phase thematic analysis approach. This method was chosen for its flexibility and its strength in capturing patterns of meaning across participant narratives while staying grounded in the qualitative data.

The session, held via Google Meet, was not audio-recorded in order to preserve participants' comfort and privacy. Instead, the researcher took detailed notes during the discussion. Immediately following the session, these notes were expanded and refined, and the draft transcript was shared with all participants for member checking. This provides them the opportunity to review, clarify, or amend their statements to ensure accurate representation.

Initial codes were generated through open coding, during which repeated ideas, recurring terms, and notable expressions were highlighted. These codes were then reviewed, grouped, and refined into

broader thematic categories that reflected key aspects of the participants' experiences. The themes were not predetermined but emerged inductively from the data, in line with the study's exploratory nature.

The analysis paid close attention to both individual perspectives and shared sentiments across the group, with particular focus on areas related to the module's design, interactivity, usability, and the institutional and peer support systems in place. Efforts were made to preserve the richness of participant voices and to ensure that the final themes reflected both common ground and divergence in experience.

Research Findings

The findings of this study are organised around four key themes that emerged during the focus group discussion: (1) design and navigation, (2) content delivery and tools, (3) ease of use and familiarity, and (4) support and guidance. These themes reflect the participants' collective and individual experiences while engaging with the e-module as part of their professional development.

Design and Navigation

Participants expressed generally positive views regarding the layout, visual structure, and overall usability of the e-module. Many highlighted the module's clean interface and intuitive navigation, which they felt made it easier to stay focused and manage their learning at their own pace. The structure of the content was described as logical and accessible, especially in comparison to earlier training materials they had encountered.

Several participants appreciated that they could progress through the material on their own schedule, which allowed for a more flexible learning experience that fit around their teaching responsibilities. However, a few noted that the absence of in-person interaction occasionally left them feeling isolated or less engaged, suggesting that they missed the spontaneous peer exchanges found in traditional, face-to-face workshops.

“Well designed, easy to follow, interesting. But do prefer physical workshops due to the social nature, getting to talk to people. But a better way for the whole population. Because it will give more opportunity to add. Self-paced and individual studying makes you drag the work. This could be a feasible way, it gives you practice.”

“Good, I enjoyed it. Found it interesting. Overall I would say it was a good experience. Navigation was easy. I could choose the topic I wanted to explore and study further. I really did not miss a physical instructor.”

Content Delivery and Tools

The interactivity of the e-module was widely praised. Participants mentioned that tools such as H5P activities, screencasts, and embedded multimedia resources helped break the monotony of passive reading and encouraged active engagement with the material. These elements were seen as especially helpful in modelling digital teaching strategies that participants could apply in their own online classrooms.

There was a shared appreciation for the range of media formats such as videos, visual aids, and short quizzes that supported multiple learning preferences. One participant noted that the visual style and concise explanations improved retention and helped them see how the module's strategies could be translated into their own course content.

"I did the H5P and it was very interesting and I will use this in my teaching. I realise that a lot of theory is delivered online, when we learn more interactive tools, this will be a great way to get students to learn and engage as this is more interactive."

"I think that's a screencast. I found that useful as well. H5P is also useful, even other than the video I explored additional resources. So this topic has made me understand the power of interactivity. Content doesn't have to be given in one way. Can be multiple ways too."

Ease of Use and Familiarity

Overall, participants described the e-module as easy to use, with minimal technical barriers. Many attributed this to their existing familiarity with the university's learning management system (LMS), which served as the platform for the module. Because they had previously used the LMS for uploading materials or running online classes, adapting to the e-module felt like a natural extension of their current teaching environment.

Nonetheless, one or two participants raised concerns about replicating the module's interactivity in their own courses. While they could follow along and complete the tasks, creating similar activities independently was seen as challenging, especially without additional training in authoring tools or multimedia design.

"Easy navigation. Content clearly organised. I could see what was what."

"I learnt many things that are new. For example the student progress check. I think it will show both students and lecturers the overall progress, and can give feedback."

“It is not easy, but I was thinking if I were to create similar activities I would need more support and assistance. Initially it would take time, time consuming and will need practice, but eventually it will become more familiar.”

Support and Guidance

Support emerged as a crucial factor in shaping participants’ experiences with the module. Several respondents mentioned that technical and pedagogical support was readily available when needed, either through institutional channels or peer networks. Quick responses to queries, especially through instant messaging platforms like Viber, were seen as instrumental in sustaining motivation and progress.

The presence of an informal peer support system also made a difference. Participants often turned to colleagues who had already completed the module for guidance, troubleshooting, or reassurance. This sense of community even in a self-paced format helped mitigate the challenges of learning in isolation.

“For me the support was sufficient. I started before everyone, and whenever I had to ask anything your response was very prompt, and Ibbe from CETE being available was useful.”

“The Viber group was easy, I could talk to the whole group. Someone always responds. Mostly you respond very quickly, so I did not have to wait.”

“Support as such I don't feel I needed as much. But yes, being in the group and knowing you are available it was good.”

Discussion

The experiences of university instructors in the Maldives who engaged with a custom-designed e-module for professional development in online teaching were explored. The findings reveal a generally positive reception of the module’s design, content, and delivery format, while also surfacing important considerations for support structures and implementation in similar contexts.

Reflecting on Learning: Evidence of Transformative Engagement

The instructors’ reflections indicate a shift in how they approached online teaching — not only in terms of technical skill, but also in pedagogical awareness. This aligns closely with Mezirow’s Transformational Learning Theory, which emphasises critical reflection and meaning-making as core

to adult learning. For many participants, the e-module did more than deliver information; it prompted them to reassess their assumptions about what effective online instruction entails.

For example, their comments on multimedia use, learner autonomy, and engagement strategies suggest that their exposure to the e-module catalysed new thinking about how technology could support learner-centred practices. Several also demonstrated a newfound awareness of instructional design principles that is, a hallmark of transformative learning processes.

“As a teacher it is challenging, for me it is difficult to still engage learners, even when I encourage, as a teacher it is very challenging, but recently when I started using the tools, for example some introduced here, I observed student engagement and response rate high, I also feel if students don't want to talk, activities that don't require talking, they do well, I feel that's because they are using phone and not a computer.”

“I have practised too, so earlier I did not really try myself. Maybe adding a quiz. I will definitely try more tools.”

Technology Acceptance: Insights from the UTAUT Framework

The findings also align well with the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which posits that technology adoption is influenced by four key constructs: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

- Performance expectancy was reflected in how participants viewed the module's relevance to their teaching goals. Many recognised its potential to improve their course delivery and student interaction, indicating that they saw clear value in the system.
- Effort expectancy emerged through participants' comments on ease of use, particularly given their prior exposure to the institutional LMS. This familiarity reduced the learning curve and made the experience feel manageable.
- Social influence played a subtle yet important role. While formal institutional encouragement may have been limited, informal peer support — such as encouragement via Viber or mentoring from colleagues — appeared to significantly influence participation and completion.
- Facilitating conditions, including responsive technical support and the structure of the module itself, enabled participants to overcome initial hurdles and engage with the content meaningfully.

Together, these factors contributed to the participants' acceptance of the e-module as a viable form of professional development.

“Supported this way, being able to question and get technical assistance helped. I will say that's why I finished it.”

“Yes it has guided me, our current pages are very basic, this module shows that the page was formulated with time and thought. If I model my pages with more interaction my students will feel more guided. The module had pdf docs as well as videos as guides so this was very interactive, so if I do the same it will be beneficial for my students.”

Beyond Design: The Role of Community and Scaffolding

While the e-module was praised for its visual clarity, interactivity, and self-paced structure, several participants noted that the absence of direct interaction sometimes limited their engagement. This highlights an important limitation of fully asynchronous PD formats — even well-designed ones.

Participants expressed a need for ongoing support and opportunities for discussion, which points to the value of blended models of PD that combine self-paced content with live or peer-based interaction. The data also suggest that instructors need more scaffolding when it comes to translating what they learned into practice — especially in areas such as creating their own multimedia content or designing engaging online activities.

These findings resonate with recent literature suggesting that professional development must extend beyond technical training to include collaborative learning environments and structured follow-up (Lloyd et al., 2023; Redstone & Luo, 2021).

Contextual Considerations for the Maldives

The context in which this study was conducted is significant. As an island nation with geographical and logistical constraints, the Maldives presents a unique case where online PD is not merely a convenience but a necessity. The participants' positive response to the e-module suggests that context-specific, flexible training models can effectively support faculty development even in remote or resource-constrained settings — provided there is adequate support and a culture of peer collaboration.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into instructors' experiences with an e-module for professional development, several limitations should be acknowledged to frame the findings appropriately. First, the study involved a small sample of six participants, all drawn from a single institution. Although purposive sampling was intentional to capture in-depth perspectives, the limited scale restricts the generalisability of the findings. The diversity of views may not fully represent the broader academic population within the Maldives or in other regional contexts.

Second, the focus group discussion was not audio recorded due to ethical and comfort considerations. While detailed field notes and member-checking were used to ensure accuracy, the absence of verbatim transcripts may have led to the loss of some nuance or missed expressions that could have enriched the analysis. Third, the study relied solely on self-reported perceptions through a single mode of data collection (a focus group). No observational or longitudinal data were included to explore how the insights from the module translated into changes in actual teaching practice. As such, the findings are based on participants' interpretations at a specific moment in time.

Additionally, some participants highlighted challenges in applying what they had learned, particularly in independently creating interactive content. This points to a potential gap between professional development exposure and practical implementation, which future studies should investigate further. Finally, the study was conducted in a unique national context that is, the Maldives, where logistical constraints make online PD particularly relevant. While this offers a rich case for context-specific design, it also limits transferability to more urbanised or resource-rich educational environments.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of university instructors in the Maldives who engaged with a self-paced e-module developed as a professional development (PD) tool for online teaching. Grounded in Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), the research sought to understand how instructors perceived the module's usability, relevance, and support structures, and to what extent these factors contributed to meaningful professional learning.

The findings revealed that participants responded positively to the module's design and structure. They appreciated the flexibility of its self-paced format, the clarity of navigation, and the use of multimedia tools such as H5P, screencasts, and progress checks. These design features contributed to participants' sense of autonomy and engagement, with many expressing increased confidence in

using similar strategies in their own teaching. However, some reported challenges in creating comparable interactive content on their own. This indicates a need for continued support and skill development beyond the module itself.

The study also highlighted the importance of peer and institutional support in enhancing the learning experience. Informal mentoring, quick assistance via messaging platforms, and group communication channels played a critical role in maintaining participant motivation. This underscores the social and relational dimensions of professional development, even in self-paced, asynchronous settings.

From a theoretical perspective, the study found clear alignment with UTAUT. Performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions were all present and influential in shaping acceptance and engagement. In parallel, elements of transformational learning were evident as participants reflected critically on their practices, adopted new perspectives, and articulated intentions to revise their teaching approaches. This suggests that the e-module fostered meaningful change rather than simply delivering procedural training.

In light of these insights, institutions designing online PD should consider not only the technical functionality and instructional content of their modules, but also the broader ecosystem of support and reflective practice. Blended approaches that pair asynchronous learning with synchronous interaction may better serve diverse instructor needs. This is especially relevant in geographically dispersed or resource-constrained contexts such as the Maldives.

Future research could expand on this study by investigating the long-term impact of such PD on teaching effectiveness. It may also be valuable to explore how different demographic, or disciplinary groups engage with similar interventions. As higher education continues to evolve in response to digital transformation, scalable and inclusive models of professional development, rooted in both pedagogical soundness and practical relevance, will be essential.

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