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Designing a social work online self-coaching program: Integrated support and joint ownership

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Abstract: The paper explores critical success factors (CSFs) in relation to the support structure for an online self-coaching pilot project, by the Centre for Innovative Education and Communication Technologies of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in South Africa, in collaboration with UWC's Social Work Department and the University of South Africa (Unisa). The CSFs focus on concepts of structure and agency. The research study is primarily qualitative but employs supporting quantitative data, and entails an interpretivist approach. The researchers highlight unfolding processes which led to an Instructional Designer (ID) taking on the role of an e-Coach within the pilot study. The importance of the creation of a well-designed environment to strengthen partnerships, and an effective learning pathway for student development is deliberated. The importance of the selection of appropriate eTools is emphasized in order to promote students' personal learning and eSkills. Moreover, the pilot project is aligned to national imperatives within a South African context, namely student "access" and "success". We recommend the expansion of online self-coaching programs to social work students to assist with their self-development and growth.

Subjects: Information & Communication Technology (ICT); Adult Education and Lifelong Learning; Educational Research; Teaching & Learning; Design & Delivery; Study of ODL and eLearning; Continuing Professional Development

Keywords: critical success factors; instructional design; student development; structure and agency; e-Coaching

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The authors are active in the fields of: instructional design; online development; implementation and training of emerging technologies; learning theories and ePedagogy; staff and student development; community engagement with government departments. Between them, they have practical experiences that spans across secondary and higher educational settings. Their research interests include: teaching-and-learning; effective use of emerging technologies; change management strategies; and institutionalizing of eLearning.



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The researchers explore critical factors with regards to the emerging field of online learning technologies, specifically within the social work discipline. This paper highlights the need for a skilled online coach within a social work program. The skills in this case refer not only to the use of technologies, rather also to the establishment of a sound support structure; the know-how of designing and developing interactive online environments; building a communication and trust relationship; and empowering the students to become self-directed learners within a blended learning environment. The online coaching program takes place within a complex higher education (HE) setting, and the lessons learnt are beneficial for other HE institutions.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, institutions of higher education (HE) have been confronted by challenges around “supercomplexity”, or what Barnett (2000, p. 415) calls “conceptual overload”. This complexity is magnified in developing world contexts, where educational institutions are faced with resource shortages coupled with pressures to expand education access to growing numbers of students. In South Africa, national discourse around student “access” and “success” has highlighted the imperative to not merely expand student numbers, but to improve academic achievement and throughput rates, considered “a very serious challenge for the university sector and [which] must become a priority focus for national policy and for the institutions themselves” (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013, p. 31). eLearning, and student mentoring and coaching efforts, have been identified by government as core components of meeting this challenge, along with a broad range of imperatives, such as the “development and use of educational technologies to support teaching and learning, as well as other kinds of support programs such as mentoring, counselling and career development, and improving the material conditions of student life” (DHET, 2013, p. 32).

The objective of this paper is to reflect on the design, development, and implementation of a support structure by the Centre for Innovative Education and Communication Technologies (CIECT) of the University of the Western Cape (UWC), for an online social work self-coaching pilot program. The authors focus on the critical success factors (CSFs) in relation to the support structure for the program, specifically in relation to effective agency and enabling structures. Prior to the implementation of the program, it was determined at the time that no online social work self-coaching program had been developed in South Africa. Furthermore, the professional support structure (CIECT) had to pioneer an online space through conceptualization, design, and development. Hence, the research will contribute to this body of knowledge.

This collaborative project forms part of the broader CIECT initiative to infuse emerging technologies into its complex HE environment, and to promote the establishment of internal and external partnerships across disciplines and geographical borders, in alignment with the current Institutional Operating Plan (IOP) White Paper of UWC, 2016–2020. This places an emphasis on the goals of building strategic partnerships and positioning student learning as a research-led process. It also extends the institutional focus on eLearning as a key role-player in promoting student development.

Hence, the broader self-coaching program, created by a social work lecturer at the University of South Africa (Unisa), and the online version, pilot-tested in a partnership between the Departments of Social Work of Unisa and UWC, took place within the framework of these institutional goals. CIECT was responsible for the creation of the online environment used by UWC’s social work students in this pilot phase. This study investigates how this formed part of CIECT’s larger support structure. For example, CIECT’s other research focuses on how learning theories underpin the use of all eLearning tools it promotes (Stoltenkamp, Siebrits & van de Heyde, 2017). This paper will link up to this related forthcoming work, and specifically explore the complex facets of setting up the online environment to support the success of the broader online social work self-coaching program, in a framework that reflects on structure and agency as CSFs.

2. Online social work self-coaching program background

The broader social work self-coaching program falls outside the scope of this paper, but it is useful to clarify some relevant concepts here. First, since this self-coaching program is conducted online, the definition of electronic mentoring provided by Smith-Jentsch, Scielzo, Yarbrough, and Rosopa (2008, p. 194) is relevant here, namely: “career and psychosocial support [that] is provided by a mentor [or coach] through computer-mediated technologies”. This positions computer-mediated technologies, such as an interactive, student-centered online environment, as central to the success of the coaching or mentoring itself, and relates to the purpose of this study, which aims to unpack the CSFs and support structure underlying a successful interactive online environment.

The pilot self-coaching blended learning project for social work students was initiated by the Unisa lecturer as part of her doctoral work at Unisa, which investigated the specific support needs of social work students within an Open Distance Learning (ODL) context, and how life coaching could contribute to meeting these needs. After identifying that no evidence existed of any life coaching model or program for social work students in South Africa or abroad, the Unisa lecturer set out to develop such a program. The overall content entailed included aspects related to the discipline: strengths and self-awareness; interests and values; connection between context and self-development; attributes and good practices; alignment between practical work, professional development and career opportunities. This content formed part of the broader curriculum, which was the responsibility of the subject matter experts (in this case Social Work Department at UWC, and Unisa lecturers).

It was then identified that the pilot project could also be undertaken at UWC, in a residential (as opposed to ODL) environment, with some adjustments, while still being conducted online. A lecturer of UWC's Social Work Department liaised with the Unisa lecturer and implemented the self-coaching pilot project at UWC. CIECT became involved in the pilot project through a series of advisory and consultation sessions aligned to the design, development and implementation phases of the online environment. This was the environment in which the UWC students interacted with the coaching material, each other, and the "life coach" (UWC lecturer) of the program. Five social work students at UWC (senior students at fourth-year level, selected by the subject matter experts) were identified to participate in the pilot during 2015, and were compensated with an honorarium for their participation.

The broader self-coaching program will be detailed in separate research by these stakeholders who own the content (at Unisa). Thus, this present study solely focuses on CIECT's enabling support structure that underlies the creation of the online environment at UWC. The following literature review section reflects on concepts of structure and agency, theories of online community creation, and online community design choices, alongside CSFs. The exploration of body of literature enables the authors to answer the following research questions: (i) how did the professional support structure pioneer an online self-coaching environment? (ii) what CSFs were identified in order to effectively support students and staff? (iii) how did the students and lecturers experience the online environment?

3. Literature review

In approaching CIECT's creation of the self-coaching online environment, used as part of this pilot project, the underlying CSFs will be considered due to their importance in the creation of the broader support structure. This will help expose the complex and multifaceted elements that contribute to creating *enabling* online environments. Freund (quoted in Selim, 2007, p. 397) regards CSFs as "those things that must be done if [an online environment] is to be successful".

The *first* CSF revolves around effective agency and enabling structures (Case, 2013). The success of any interactive online environment initiative depends on a thorough appreciation of the interplay of structure and agency. To understand the success and impact of CIECT's support environment requires an exploration of the interplay between the structures of CIECT within UWC, alongside the Social Work Department. In this case, the key agents within CIECT team include the instructional designers (IDs). Human agency and social structure are co-constituted and mutually interdependent, and Willett (2008, p. 50) emphasizes the importance of not regarding structure and agency in dichotomous terms. These concepts are crucial since professional support staff members, namely the IDs, are key agents in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing online learning environments which, as Loureiro-Koechlin and Allan (2010, p. 733) argue, constitute the "collaborative learning structures" within which students work and learn. In addition, the concept of the "reflexive self" is also applicable, since the identities and roles of the IDs are not fixed, and are subject to continuous reflection and reworking (Willett, 2008, p. 55).

The key agents and structures involved in this pilot project stem from national, institutional, and departmental levels. On a national level, the agents are cognizant of policies and directives within the DHET. These are aligned to institutional policies. In this case, these are further aligned to departmental requisites. The social work students within the pilot study are also identified as key agents. The authors elaborate on the structures, agents, and their interactions in the analysis section.

The *second CSF* for CIECT's support structure revolves around the provision of a scaffolded approach, in order to ensure the provision of critical incremental steps, including "familiarisation and socialisation" within an online environment, prior to the achievement of effective online communication and knowledge creation (Salmon, 2000). The scaffolded approach corroborates the work of Garrison (2003a) who argues that the very nature of online learning initiatives requires that students become self-directed to take on more responsibility in the learning process. However, this expectation can be a challenge as students must engage in "monitoring and managing the cognitive and contextual aspects of their learning" (Garrison, 2003a). Thus, this approach requires, as Salmon (2000) states, a further developmental step which entails that lecturers and facilitators assume responsibility since they need to structure and guide students' learning in an encouraging and supportive manner. Garrison (2003b, p. 165) emphasizes that "without appropriate support and guidance learners may not persist or achieve the desired educational outcomes". Appropriate guidance remains a key element in enabling self-directed learning (SDL). Such an enabled SDL process thus forms part of a collaborative-constructivist learning approach (Garrison, 2003b). In turn, a structure and guided environment enables students to effectively assume greater responsibility and control of their learning.

Continuous hands-on facilitation is important to draw maximum benefit from SDL. In the South African context, Nykiel-Herbert (2004, p. 262) warns that without this "necessary conceptual knowledge and practical skills" a learner-centered pedagogy "can become a destructive weapon". This is echoed in other online learning literature as well, where Song and Hill (2007, p. 27) note that a key focus area for research is exploring the ability of learners to undertake SDL. In this case, as mentioned, the pilot self-coaching-blended learning project consisted of both critical hands-on consultations and an interactive online environment.

Research shows that, especially for online SDL to be a success, learners have three particular needs: first, to be made aware of and to actively explore the available learning resources in the online learning environment; second, to identify strategies that will guide them to make effective use of those resources; and third, to provide motivation to counteract the procrastination that can affect online learning more readily than traditional classroom settings, and to meaningfully interact via online communication avenues (Song & Hill, 2007, p. 35). The second CSF highlights CIECT's scaffolded approach, especially the key role of the ID in relation to motivating and guiding the students and the online coach within face-to-face and online contexts.

The *third CSF* relates to the processes of facilitation and the enablement of effective communication among participants in the pilot project. These processes take place long before the implementation of projects, as they form part of the conceptualization phase, which includes the identification of the pedagogical and learning affordances of various eTools (both within the institutional Learning Management System (LMS, Sakai platform), and various other Personal Learning Environments). This extends to the design choices made by the CIECT agents.

Processes cannot be underestimated as Yang, Li, Tan, and Teo (2007, p. 456) state that "communication [is] a necessary and fundamental mechanism for effective learning". This is also directly related to theories of social learning, and Yang et al. (2007, p. 458) emphasize that effective learning requires more than "mere access to information but also require[s] engagement with others".

Yang et al. (2007) note that a key determining factor in the impact of technology on student performance is the degree to which they participate. The Online Discussion Forum (ODF) serves as an

effective communication and participation tool within the LMS for both students and the online coach. The ODF entails asynchronous communication, thus there is less opportunity for anyone “to dominate the discussion”, and a higher likelihood of promoting more “equitable opportunities than in traditional classroom discussion” (Yang et al., 2007, pp. 458–459).

Another motivating factor is the extent to which students view the ODF as being able to “help achieve the anticipated utilitarian outcome”, which relates to their expected outcomes of the coaching program. As Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007, p. 379) emphasize, “Technical and social choices that influence people’s interactions in the [online] community are implemented through ‘community design’, that is, the navigation architecture, site features, interactions, and organization structures and policies of the community”. In this case, community design refers to the agential choices, both technical and social, made by the CIECT team which has a direct bearing on the design of the online structure. In turn, this structure impacts the agency of the participants within this environment.

A crucial principle of design is that it can either facilitate or thwart genuine and meaningful online communication and interaction. Thus, all “websites ... are the product of ... choices, and of the contingencies of context ... opened up (or closed off) by websites [including learning environments and thus] are not a product of the technology as such, but of the ways in which it is constructed, by the way it is designed” (Wright & Street, 2007, p. 850, emphasis added).

A well-designed environment benefits coaching. Caspi (2005, p. 359) claims that coaching consists of “helping processes that focus on self-understanding and self-discipline to change behaviors, attitudes and feelings”.

Thus, the *fourth CSF* relates to the coaching aspect of the project, which focused on developing the ability of the students to undertake self-coaching and empower themselves with essential tools and knowledge that they can implement throughout their careers as life-long learners. e-Coaching, defined by DiRenzo, Linnehan, Shao, and Rosenberg (2010) as “the act of providing and receiving guidance and support through computer-mediated technology, i.e. e-mail, electronic chat, message boards, etc.” constitutes a highly promising, and (according to DiRenzo et al., 2010) an under-researched field in education scholarship. Its value is, however, strongly supported by Teemant, Wink, and Tyra (2011), who argues that “Coaching has emerged as an effective strategy for ongoing teacher development”, and that in turn, “Improving teacher quality is pivotal to improving student achievement”. Teemant et al. (2011) also highlights the multifaceted nature of coaching, which is “job-embedded, teacher directed, school based, collaborative, ongoing, information rich professional development that focuses on student learning”.

In electronic coaching, various communication avenues and tools can be used, synchronously and asynchronously, such as email, discussion forums, message boards, and online chat (Smith-Jentsch et al., 2008, p. 194). Communication can take place between the coach, defined as “an individual of advanced experience who is committed to supporting the development of another less experienced individual [or individuals], namely the protégé[s]”, and between these protégés themselves (Smith-Jentsch et al., 2008, p. 193). Hrastinski and Stenbom (2013, p. 66) highlight the need to recognize the importance of such peer coaching as well—“where a student gets support on a specific subject matter from a more experienced student”. Promoting the ability of students to also become coaches to others opens up the possibility that those future social workers can employ and teach coaching techniques in their profession—a promising development as Caspi (2005, p. 360) contends: “Coaching may benefit social work because it offers new methods and practice areas”.

Ultimately, these relationships (between the coach and students, and between the students themselves) serve two primary functions as mentioned above, psychosocial support (such as role-modeling and counseling), and career support (such as offering advice and performance feedback). These points are highlighted here since, as the discussion section will show, CIECT’s ID working on this pilot frequently communicated with the participants to motivate and offer support,

strengthening one of the arguments made in this paper that mere provision of an online environment is not enough to ensure it successfully promotes student learning. Indeed, as Garrison (2003a) argues, the “challenge is that educators have the responsibility to provide structure and guidance that will encourage and support students assuming increased control of their learning”. In this program, it will be demonstrated that the ID fulfilled several crucial functions in support of this goal as an educator.

Section 4 will provide an overview of the research design and methodology of the study. These follow on the four CSFs discussed here, and are grounded within the broader literature.

4. Methodology

This research study, which is primarily qualitative but contains supporting quantitative data, entails an interpretivist approach, specifically of the ethnographic variety, with a strong emphasis on participant observation. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994, p. 249) contend that no study of the social world can be undertaken without the researchers being part of it, and they label this “a mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers”. This is of particular relevance here since the researchers are members of the CIECT team (social group), and participate in and observe the social work pilot project (in the context of the online environment). Moreover, such a methodological approach is part of the postmodernist movement that “seeks to dissolve that disjuncture between the observer and the observed” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 256). Neuman (2003, p. 365) expands on this, noting that here the emphasis is on “direct, face-to-face social interaction with ‘real people’ in a natural setting”.

Ethnography is deemed appropriate for this study, for four particular reasons, outlined by Atkinson and Hammersley (1994, p. 248). First, ethnographic research emphasizes broadly the exploration of social phenomena, as opposed to testing hypotheses regarding those phenomena. Second, data in ethnographic studies tend to be unstructured (i.e. not “coded at the point of data collection”). Third, only small numbers of cases are included, such as in this study, which focuses on one specific case. Fourth, primary emphasis is placed on qualitative data, involving the “meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations”, while quantitative data play a supporting role. This is part of the broader rejection of positivism, and the argument that complex social behavior cannot be adequately captured by quantitative measures and hypothesis testing.

The process of data collection related to the design, development, and implementation of the interactive learner-centered online environment was directly built into the project, and supplemented with questionnaires (which were administered online). Primary data sources include observations by CIECT’s Instructional Designer, as well as project documentation, discussion group messages (in this case via the LMS, email, and WhatsApp), and three questionnaires. The data from these questionnaires are presented in Figures 1–4, and analyzed using an online survey application. In contrast, Figures 5–7 were retrieved from the LMS, and then labels were adapted accordingly (in order to anonymize the participants/data). Of these questionnaires, one was predominantly open-ended for the internal and external lecturers and two predominantly closed-ended for the five senior UWC students who participated in the pilot. The aim was to explore their experiences in relation to CIECT’s design, development and implementation phases which enabled a support structure and interactive online environment, entailing specific learning pathways, enabling completion of the self-coaching program. The student questionnaires were particularly important given that this was a pilot project, with further roll-out expected for social work undergraduates at UWC. Understanding the experiences of the five UWC students provides rich data crucial to ironing out any potential hurdles that could otherwise be encountered with future increased student participation. The survey results are presented in Section 5. Furthermore, the overall findings are deliberated in the analysis section.

Figure 1. Purpose of prior LMS usage by the UWC students.

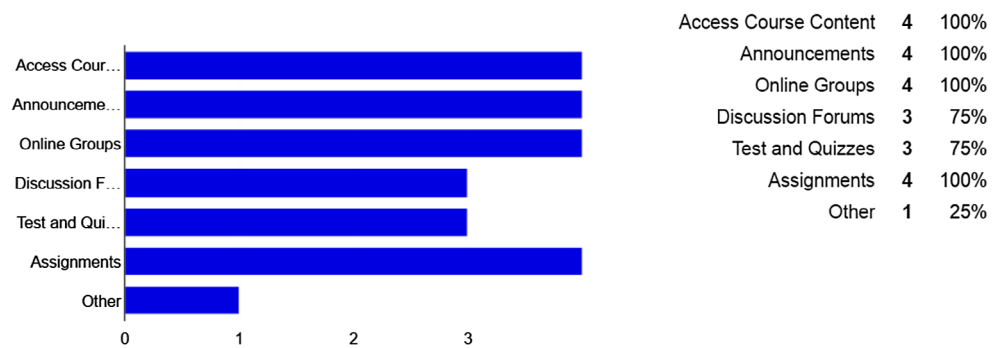


Figure 2. eTools used by students in the social work self-coaching program.

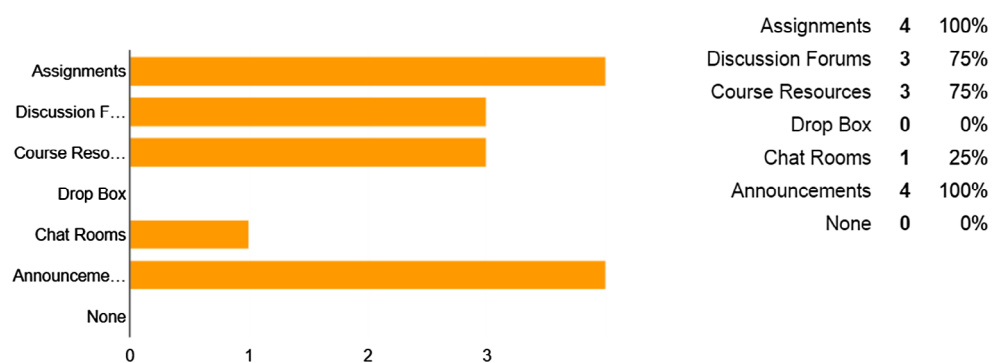
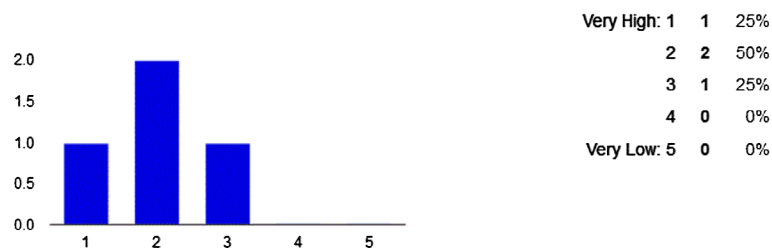


Figure 3. Ratings of visibility (engagement).

During the programme, rate the visibility (engagement) of your online coach (lecturer).



During the programme, rate the visibility (engagement) of the Instructional Designer (CIECT employee)

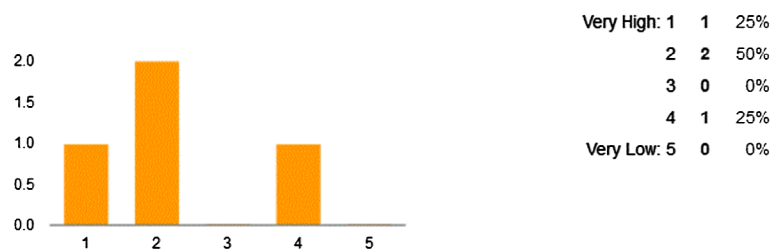


Figure 4. Overall experience of social work self-coaching pilot program.

Rate your overall experience within this programme.

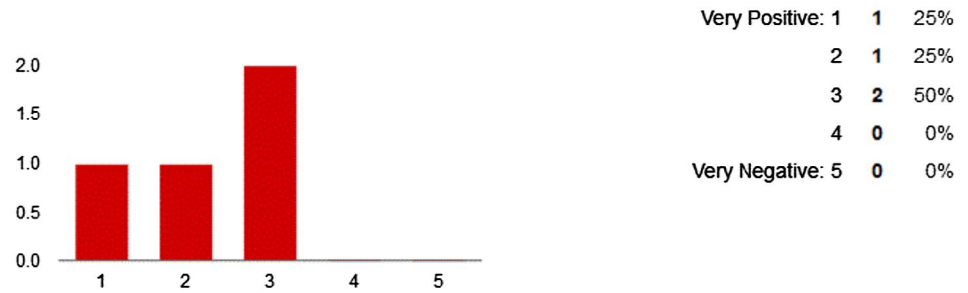


Figure 5. Pie chart showcasing the total site visits on LMS for all agents.

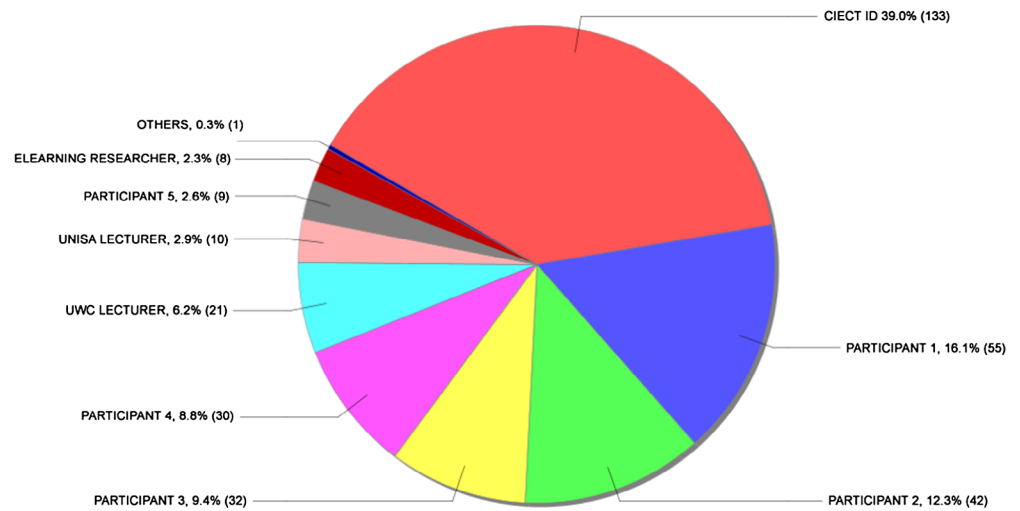


Figure 6. Pie chart showcasing the site activity for all agents.

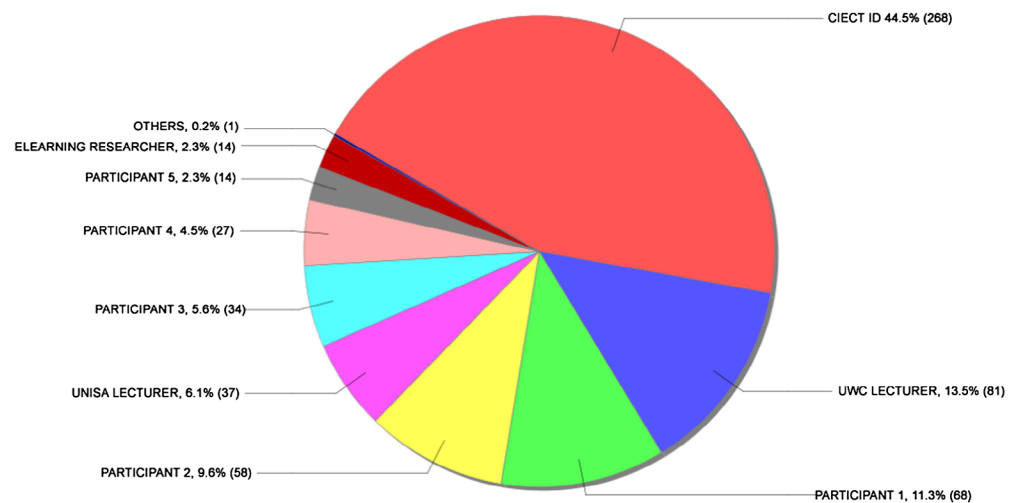
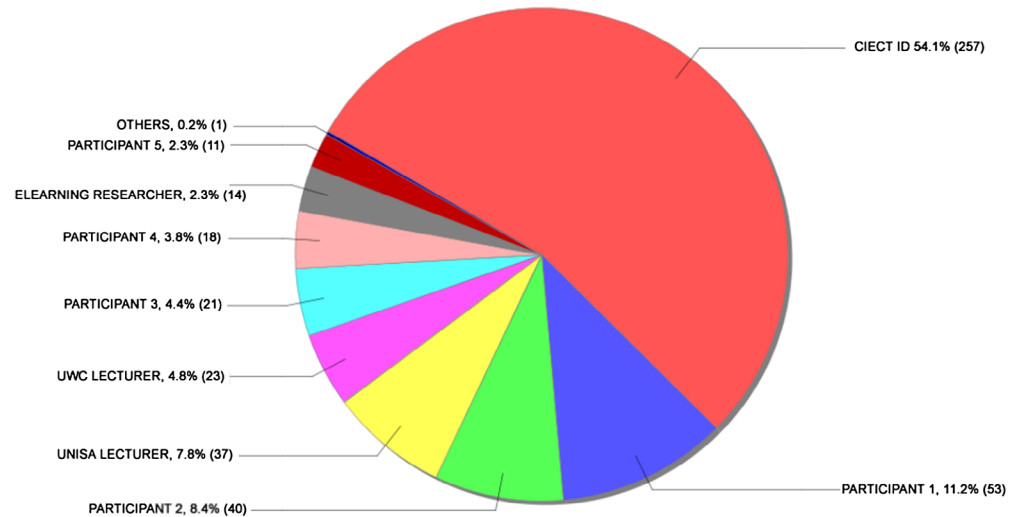


Figure 7. Pie chart showcasing total resource views and downloads by all agents since site creation.



5. Findings: Survey feedback

This section will present the results of the three survey questionnaires. First, to give a broad perspective, the views of the lecturers will be shared, which were collected after the conclusion of this pilot project. Second, the feedback from the students, which was collected via two questionnaires (during and after the program), will follow.

5.1. Lecturer survey questionnaire

Five questions were posed to the UWC lecturer (online coach) and the Unisa lecturer (project owner) at the end of the project, in order to explore their experiences of collaborating with CIECT (and its ID). Both lecturers completed the questionnaire.

The first question focused on the importance of the ID's role within the pilot project. One response was neutral (neither important nor unimportant), while the other response indicated that the role of the ID was "very unimportant".

The second question focused on the elaboration of the prior responses. One response indicated that the ID "has made it [the pilot project] his own in terms of his commitment and work ethic. He was always on top of things and sent out timely reminders to all of us. He designed the online environment and took a special interest in everything that had to be done. He was indispensable". The second response stated that "Unisa's programme was developed through Unisa's support systems". In this sense, it is thus understandable that the answer to question one was "very unimportant".

The third question was based on the lecturers' overall experiences, and focused on improvements and recommendations. Neither respondents offered any specific suggestions for improvements, but focused on the value of CIECT's contributions. One emphasized the importance of constructive relationships where "role players know what their roles are and get on well with each other". Positive elements in this regard were identified, such as the beneficial relationship between the ID and the five participating students: "The student participants got on very well with him as well and felt he was very approachable and patient"; the relationship between the ID and the online coach: "the relationship between the ID and lecturer (online coach) was and is vital"; and the ID and external lecturer: "[the ID] was never to[o] busy to assist the researchers even [a lecturer] at Unisa in a different institution. There was mutual respect for the competencies of each role player". The Unisa lecturer's response reflected on the institutional-level agreement and legal requirements for future rollout at UWC.

Question four focused on whether respondents would recommend such an online self-coaching environment to their colleagues across disciplines. Both respondents answered yes.

Finally, question five prompted the respondents to elaborate on the reasons for their choice in question four. One response stated: “I believe that students would all benefit by this kind of online coaching for their self-development. This programme links strongly with the university’s graduate attributes”. The other indicated: “I do believe the programme can be well used within various context[s]”.

The overall feedback indicates that the pilot project was a success from the perspective of the lecturers. Furthermore, it presents an ID who took initiative resulting in filling a specific coaching role. Hence, the ID becomes a self-directed learner within a learning space. In this project, an online coaching role includes aspects of student motivation, guiding and monitoring them through a range of activities, and advising the lecturer on the “visibility” of an online coach. This corroborates the work of Salmon (2004, p. 10), who speaks of the need to motivate the “e-learner” through the development of appropriate “e-tivities”.

5.2. First student questionnaire (midway through pilot)

Two student questionnaires were conducted at different times throughout the pilot (midway and at the conclusion). In both questionnaires, four out of the five UWC students submitted responses (80%). The first questionnaire, discussed here, was completed after the start of the pilot, thus first allowing the students to become familiar with the online environment.

The first question (of Questionnaire 1, consisting of 13 questions) explored the students’ exposure to Learning Management Systems before engaging in this program. All four respondents indicated they had prior exposure. In addition, question two focused on the students’ deliberations in relation to their prior use of LMSs. Figure 1 reflects on the various prior engagements with LMSs.

The third question asked how frequently the students accessed the UWC institutional LMS, *iKamva* (including for this pilot project). Three responded “a few times per week” and one responded “more than once per day”. Question four explored the number of courses the students had access to. The responses indicated an average of seven courses (responses ranged from six to eight). Question five then asked the respondents to rate their ability to make use of the functionalities of the eTools in *iKamva*. All respondents indicated “good”.

Question six focused on the students’ willingness to engage interactively with peers, and the online coach, within the self-coaching program. Of the responses, three students stated yes, while one stated no. Question seven explored how the students rated the importance of being an active participator for the success of the program. Three students responded “very important” and one responded “neither important nor unimportant”. In addition, question eight focused on the deliberation of the specific eTools used by the five students within the self-coaching pilot program. Figure 2 depicts the eTools within program.

Question nine asked the respondents if these eTools assisted them with their personal learning and development processes. Three indicated yes and one no. The next question asked those who stated yes to deliberate. The following responses were received: “It improved my communication skills and it provided me with an opportunity to engage with other peers in the discussion forum”; “interpersonal, interacting, observation, learning and listening skills”; “The eTools in this programme have assisted me to communicate online with my peers not only in this programme, but my academic work as well. I was able to view my peer’s perspective and to reply or comment in order to give my perspective. I have learned much through the interaction with others which this programme has made possible. I have also improved my computer skills which I had very little knowledge of prior to my studies”.

Question 11 explored whether the students preferred to engage online or face-to-face given their experiences in the program. Three students indicated preferring to engage face-to-face for a variety of reasons. These included important aspects of communication that are not visible in an online environment, such as: “when one engage[s] in conversation online you are not able to observe people’s non verbal communication and can miss certain nuances. As a social worker, observing people’s non verbal communication is a vital part of assessment. I am also not always [able] to be actively part of a discussion online since I do not always have access to the internet. I do however have no problem with engaging online, and will do so whenever necessary”. Other responses highlighted concerns around infrastructure and costs: “everyone is not online or available at the same time and it is very expensive to access internet. Being final year students we are not everyday at campus [to be able to use the campus internet]”; “Online meetings need a fast and stable internet connection, which is both scarce and pricey in South Africa. For now, face to face would be better until the country irons out kinks of the current internet services. I would probably fully make use of online meetings and discussions in the next 5 years, once fibre optics and LTE ha[ve] been fully launched and implemented and the price significantly decreased”. The final response to question 11 revealed no preference: “Both ways of communications are of paramount inportan[ce] depending [on] the topic of the day. I prefer face-to-face when I need further clarity”.

Question 12 explored whether students believed that iKamva was a relevant or useful online medium for a self-coaching program. All four responses stated yes. Reasons varied, and included: “it works well especially if you cannot speak to people face to face. It gives you an opportunity to discuss and leave messages even though you are not online at the same time”—indicating the importance of asynchronous communications; “especially when my peers and I are not able to be at campus and get together to complete a project”—indicating the importance of freeing students from the need to be co-located; “This is the future of coaching, and will save time, money and human resources”; and “because it is not only the use of it but also a learning curve for me”.

The final question (number 13) asked what kind of problems students were encountering within the overall online environment in order to assist the ID with specific future developments and improvements. Three of the four responses centered on access problems: “The main problem is that a person need[s] to be online when completing the surveys. It would be nice if a person could download a word document which we can complete it in then upload it once a person is done”; “connection problems—refer to point 11”; and “I did not have any problems with the project other than my personal lack of access to the internet”. The fourth response indicated “I met the problem of uploading my assignment sometimes. However this is because the due date is over and the program is closed”.

The overall feedback for student Questionnaire 1 highlights a series of contradictions that bear further deliberation here. Students indicated that they were experienced with the functionalities of the LMS. However, the online coach (ID) observed that the students needed extensive training and assistance in order to navigate the online program. This was despite the UWC lecturer claiming they would not need training due to their level of study (fourth year).

In addition, the data revealed that one of the students indicated that they did not align this program to his/her personal development. The students also emphasized the importance of time management in terms of balancing online engagement and other academic modules.

This further linked to South African contextual issues related to access and resources (in this case both for the students and the communities they are expected to engage in). Hence, they still view an online environment as supplementary to their social work practices, due to various constraints. The data thus reveal that they are still grappling with what they were exposed to within this program, and how they are going to transfer their skills to the broader social work professional community.

Furthermore, the data revealed that the practitioners within the field of instructional design should always be cognizant of participants' anxieties and fears toward the adoption of emerging technologies. Thus, even though in this case the students engaged online (submissions, discussions, and completed surveys), they still expressed that they would be comfortable with traditional ways of doing things (i.e. the ID had to repeatedly communicate through other media, such as emails). In this case, the ID could deduce that this feedback was provided by a student who did not attend any training sessions.

This again corroborates the work of Salmon (2004), which highlights the importance "e-moderating skills", and emerging relevant teaching and learning approaches, which must be coupled together with technology to enable one to reflect on appropriate e-tivities, essential training, and various online facilitation skills.

5.3. Second student questionnaire (conclusion of pilot)

As stated, for the second student questionnaire (eight questions), four responses were also received. Question one asked whether, after having completed the online self-coaching program, the students would recommend it to their peers. All four answered yes.

When asked to elaborate on their choice, the following responses were received: "I will recommend to my peers because in a built up to motivation and it encourage openness and self assertiveness"; "Online coaching is a huge step towards learning in the future. It opens up new possibilities and opportunities for students"; "it provides the students with any opportunity to communicate with each other via internet. It provides the student to upload ass[ignments] online"; and "Is a good method to self development and reflection".

In question three, the students were asked to describe, as they experienced it, what the role of the ID was in guiding them through the online environment. This was another means to verify this role, this time from the student perspective (since the question was also posed for lecturers). The four responses were: "Provide guidance and technical support when needed"; "The instructor was very accommodating and well versed about the online environment. He was also available at all times"; "The CIECT played a pivotal role on disseminating information and make everyone rather myself comfortable to continue. He was always available, willing to assist and accommodating".

The fourth question asked students to reflect on, and share, what improvements could be made in terms of the online environment, if any. Three students responded as follows: "it would be nice if the evaluation can be downloaded and then completed. It uses a lot of data"; "The experience was one of learning and the fact that I can complete this form on my phone, is already a major improvement"; "The online coaching should be extended even to lower level of academics like first years. This will improve their computer literacy skills as well".

The fifth and sixth questions asked students to rate the visibility (engagement) of their online coach (lecturer), and the ID, respectively. The results are presented in Figures 3.

Question seven provided students with the opportunity to rate their overall experience with the social work self-coaching pilot program (from "very positive" to "very negative"), and the results, which indicate a broadly positive rating, are displayed in Figure 4.

The final, open-ended question, allowed students to add any further comment they wished. Two responses were received: "None", and "I enjoyed the online coaching experience very much. I learned how to work in a new programme and have an extra item to add to my CV".

The overall feedback indicates that the pilot project was a success from the perspective of the students. The students recommended the program for future roll-out to others, especially in relation to the online environment providing a learning space that builds confidence for self-reflection. The

role of the ID was deemed as important, especially in relation to guidance, technical support, online visibility, and creating comfortable safe spaces for engagement. The students recognized the benefits of the system being accessible via mobile devices (in this case, mobile phones). Moreover, and importantly, the students recognized the need to instill positive online behavior and interactive engagement from an early stage of their careers.

A startling contradiction was, however, presented (explored in Section 6), whereby the students perceived the ID's visibility (engagement) as less important than the lecturer's (subject matter expert/online coach). However, the question specifically related to the ID's role elicited a wholly positive view. Accordingly, the ID can claim the success of the program, in terms of positive feedback and that they perceived it as a contribution to their personal professional development.

Section 6 will present further data analysis, aligned to the literature discussed earlier. This will include themes of agency and structure, as well as support criteria related to eLearning implementation, ePedagogy, effective usage of eTools, and application within specific contexts, as CSFs.

6. Analysis and discussion of the findings

Here, the data presented in Section 5 will be analyzed in relation to the earlier discussion of the CSFs of CIECT's support environment for this project. First, however, it should be noted that the structuring of activities (including the type of tasks and the assessment approach) for the classroom will become more demanding as educators increasingly employ emerging technologies. Technology has become a vital component of education, and as discussed, can offer promising avenues for coaching and self-coaching activities. Unfortunately, it is often insufficiently assessed whether it augments learner-focused activities (Adams, Sida-Nichols, & Brindley, 2007, p. 26). It is problematic to take for granted that educators will review and plan teaching-and-learning activities according to the demands of new technology (Lim & Chai, 2008, p. 808). This is where it becomes important for the CIECT team (especially, the IDs), to assist and guide academics in the adoption of ePedagogy skills within a complex higher education context. For a full discussion of this process, which follows a non-technicist approach, and which revolves around an eLearning online course creation model (see Stoltenkamp, Kies, & Njenga, 2007).

The four CSFs discussed in section three will now be used to structure the rest of the discussion. In addition to the previously discussed data, supporting quantitative data were drawn from the LMS, which serves as a statistical database in relation to online activities and usage.

6.1. CSF 1: Effective agency and enabling structures

As stated in the literature review, the first CSF revolves around effective agency and enabling structures. As discussed in section two, the ID, in collaboration with the lecturers became immersed within various phases of implementation of the program and its possible usage as a blueprint for further roll-out (even across other disciplines). Various stakeholders within the project became effective agents creating enabling structures.

Salmon (2004, p. 31) argues that lecturers require "information and technical support to get online, and strong motivation and encouragement to put in the necessary time and effort". In addition, it became the joint responsibility of the ID and the lecturers to ensure that the students gained sufficient eSkills to be able to successfully navigate the LMS. Hence, it was vital for those responsible (ID and lecturers) to integrate eTools training sessions right from the start, for the benefit of the student participants. Although the UWC lecturer argued that training for fourth-year students was not necessary, the ID observed the opposite. Thus, the ID met with the students to provide training and support with regards to the specific eTools. As a result of this training, all respondents in the first student questionnaire indicated their ability to make use of the various eTools as "good" (question six). Similarly, in question eight, they indicated that they were making use of a variety of eTools.

In addition, the CIECT team observed that the online environment was becoming a more collaborative learning structure (in line with Loureiro-Koechlin and Allan's observation, 2010, p. 733). This was evident from the first student questionnaire (question 10), where three out of the four respondents commented on their peer learning and engagement. Effective interplay between agency and structure is depicted as a result of this engagement.

Furthermore, the observations corroborate Willett's concept of the reflexive self (2008, p. 55) which is of direct relevance to the CIECT team, who operate in between and across professional and academic roles. A professional support staff team must "work through challenges that can break collaborative initiatives and relationships" (Stoltenkamp, Van de Heyde, & Siebrits, 2016).

Moreover, the respondents reflected on the agency of the ID in the second student questionnaire (question three), by commenting on his guiding role. All four indicated that the ID assisted them with regards to online visibility, addressing requests related to access and technical support, disseminating information, and engaging the students continuously within various tasks. Curiously, in the same questionnaire (fifth and sixth question), the students rated the ID as being less engaged during the project. However, the LMS data presented later will show that the ID was in fact the most engaged agent in the project.

6.2. CSF 2: Necessary scaffolding approach

As mentioned previously, providing the necessary scaffolding approach to both students and UWC lecturer, by familiarizing and socializing them with the online environment, enabled self-directed learning (SDL). While the students did have access to a coach, in the form of the UWC lecturer, the ID performed several key mentoring activities.

The UWC lecturer claimed that final-year students do not need training, especially as they would have engaged in the institutional LMS by that stage. Following this claim, the ID observed that the students were familiar with the look and feel of the LMS. However, they needed assistance with regards to effective navigation, submission of assignments, and responding to discussion threads. The ID observed that the students often did not post replies in the correct topics. Hence, in the first student questionnaire (question one), all of the respondents indicated that they did make use of an LMS prior to their engagement in the pilot project. However, the students requested a full training session on iKamva and the related eTools even though the pilot project had already commenced. Moreover, the UWC lecturer also requested a refresher training session from the ID with regards to relevant eTools.

The scaffolding approach designed by the ID had to address three particular student needs for the attainment of SDL (deliberated in literature review). These are awareness, provision of strategies to guide the effective use of resources, and motivation. The first need (awareness) was addressed through the training provided by the ID on how to effectively use the online environment and learning resources for participation and successful completion of the pilot project.

The second need (effective guidance) was addressed by the ID through the scaffolding of assessment and communication activities for students. It should be noted, that the scaffolded approach also assisted the UWC lecturer. The ID provided advice in relation to the distribution of student evaluation forms at the end of every "Conversation" (chapter). In addition, the lecturer was advised (training and demonstration) regarding the pedagogical value of an emerging eTool, namely Doctopus (a virtual copy machine), in order to distribute and customize the evaluation accordingly. These forms were stored within a structured online platform, serving as a centralized repository, accessible from any geographical setting and mobile device. This innovative approach was implemented by the ID, even though the UWC lecturer (the coach) had received training.

The third need (motivation) was also addressed by the ID via continuous communication with the students. This took the form of various mentoring activities such as monitoring replies to topics

within the ODF, and following up on assignment submissions and completion of student evaluation forms. In addition, mentoring activities also took the form of face-to-face and online support meetings with students. These were further supplemented with continuous communication via email and a WhatsApp group.

Furthermore, it should be noted that mentoring activities by the ID included the provision of continuous updates to the UWC lecturer, regarding the monitoring and tracking of the progress of the students. The following is an example:

Dear Social Work Students, I trust you are good. To date, there has been no activity on the Discussion Forums, Assignments and Conversation Surveys. A prior announcement was sent last week to remind you about the mentioned activities. Please complete the relevant activities soon. Regards.

These mentoring activities are indicative of the close professional relationship between the ID, UWC lecturer and the students. As discussed by the Stoltenkamp et al. (2016), the building and maintenance of trust relationships in complex higher education institutions forms a core part of professional practice.

This provision of structure, guidance, and motivation, via a scaffolded approach, is inseparable from agential visibility, which will be discussed in Section 6.3.

6.3. CSF 3: Interactive online environment

UWC's institutional LMS, allows for the gathering of detailed statistical information regarding online course activity, engagement, and participation, making it a potent research database and analysis tool. Figures 5–7 will elaborate on, and corroborate, the survey responses, which will showcase the total site visits and activities since the start of the project. Hence, the specific supporting quantitative data relate to the rating provided by the participants of the visibility (engagement) of the UWC lecturer (coach) and the ID. It also highlights the importance of the ID's role in the pilot project as rated by the two social work lecturers.

The respondents also reflected on the agency of the ID in the second student questionnaire (question three) by commenting on the guiding role of the ID. As the data previously reflected, all four students indicated that the ID guided them well through the environment, even though claims were made related to a less engaged ID.

Figures 5–7 reflect a visible and highly engaged ID (agent). According to Figure 5, the ID's total site visits (logins) was over six times higher than that of the coach. More importantly, according to Figure 6, in terms of total site activity (use of eTools for specific purposes), the ID was over three times more active than the coach, and four times more active than the most active student. Figure 7 displays the total resource views and downloads by all agents since site creation. Here too, the ID viewed the resources eleven times more than the coach, and almost five times more than the most active student. This supporting quantitative data is indicative of a professional support staff member who went beyond the call of instructional design activities to fulfill the role of a mentor. As Song and Hill (2007, p. 32) argue, “constructive and informative feedback from the instructor can facilitate learners' SDL, but simple judgmental feedback such as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ may lead learners to trying to figure out what the instructor wants instead of what they can make sense of when they are learning”.

Thus, in light of this data, the authors argue that the other agents undervalued the ID's contribution and importance for the success of the project (as evidenced in their questionnaire responses). The feedback of the student participants in the second questionnaire disproportionately favors the visibility (engagement) of the lecturer (coach), while the lecturers at best indicated neutral in terms of the importance of the ID. Thus, contrary to expectations, and as findings in previous research also

revealed, the CIECT ID, “In certain facets of this project ... had to fill the role of the [coach]” (Stoltenkamp et al., 2016).

6.4. CSF 4: ID takes the role of an online coach

This section reiterates that the study does not focus on the social work content, provided by the lecturers (subject matter experts). Rather, as reflected in the previous sections, online mentoring activities taken on by the ID also constitutes part of coaching. As discussed in the literature review, the role of an e-Coach includes the provision of support and guidance to participants through computer-mediated technology. This also consists of psychosocial (including motivational) as well as technical support. This is supported by the qualitative and quantitative data in the study.

Mentoring (as previously shown) took place through various modes of delivery, including: face-to-face consultations, training sessions, and regular meetings with the subject matter expert; as well as online visibility and engagement within the institutional LMS and via social media platforms. The responses of question 12 of the first student questionnaire illustrate that the LMS is a useful medium for a self-coaching program. The student views emphasize the ID’s influence on the participant engagement. The ID, as an e-Coach, could exert this influence because his habitat is the LMS, of which the affordances are well known to the ID.

Section 6 was dedicated to the analysis in order to substantiate the claim that the ID took on the role of an e-Coach in order to support the success of the pilot project. The following section will present the conclusion and recommendations for further research and possible roll-out across other disciplines.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper sets out to explore the CSFs in relation to CIECT’s support structure for an online self-coaching pilot project, in collaboration with the UWC Social Work Department, and Unisa. These were: effective agency and enabling structures, necessary scaffolding approach, interactive online environment, and the taking on of a role of an online coach. The researchers are cognizant of the small sample size. However, the paper provides lessons from the pilot, pertinent to the higher education domain.

The paper highlights how an instructional designer (ID) took on the role of an e-Coach by engaging in various mentoring activities for student development. One of the main themes emerging from this study is the observation that the online environment itself comes last in a project, and follows on a range of support factors, including management of stakeholders, the creation of a supportive and collaborative environment, team management, advisory sessions, and the implementation of eSkills, ePedagogy, design, and development phases.

Furthermore, the importance of the creation of a conducive environment for partnership, and the implementation of a support pathway to enable success in an online learning environment, were discussed. This illustrates and reinforces the initial comment by Barnett (2000) regarding the super complexity faced by Higher Education Institutions worldwide. Online learning environments present a promising arena for expanding educational access amid resource shortages, especially in developing world contexts. However, to enhance the prospects of promoting student success, online learning environments must be undertaken with an understanding of the CSFs and the intensive support pathway needed, including the complex and multifaceted roles that must be fulfilled by instructional designers.

It is up to Unisa, as the content copyright holder, to decide on further rollout of the broader Social Work Self-Coaching Program, but given the data collected in this study, the argument can be made that the online supporting environment created by CIECT had its own benefits for the professional development of staff and students.

The findings of the study emphasize that the eTools used in the program assisted with students' personal learning, eSkills and development processes. In addition, recommendations by the lecturers and students reflect the benefits of roll-out to the broader Social Work Department and other disciplines.

This study highlights CIECT's roll in alignment with the IOP 2016–2020 White Paper, which includes among others such cross cutting themes as “The University in the Digital Age” and “The Twenty-First Century Graduate Student”:

Education for a rapidly transforming society necessarily involves building a culture of inclusiveness and connecting people in new ways. This has large implications for holistic student development and for the manner in which interactions are initiated and pursued in and from the campus. (p. 5)

Strengthened and dynamic e-learning provision through the infusion of technology into the curriculum and the innovative use of technology within the student's academic experience. (p. 14)

The challenge for universities is to embrace technology creatively to meet learning, research and administrative goals across a broad front. (p. 36)

A concluding remark relates to the findings of the questionnaires, which indicated that the role of the ID was undervalued and underestimated by both the lecturers and students despite the supporting quantitative data. For the duration of this pilot project, the ID filled the unrecognized role of an e-Coach. This correlates with the concept of “secret managers” (Kehm, 2006, p. 170), since the ID has to cycle between various roles within any given project, which previous research by CIECT indicates is a recurring trend (Stoltenkamp, 2012).

In this project, as in others, CIECT took the initiative and drew upon the agency and expertise of team members, who as agents set up enabling structures to promote student development. These can be used as blueprints across disciplines in other higher education settings. It is also hoped that this study serves to uncover some of the ways in which professional support staff enable the success of departmental student programs, including in social work, in ways that often remain unseen and unrecognized.

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