

Editorial: Competence, well-being, and innovation in open, distance, and digitalised education — new frontiers from recent research

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101

The rapid evolution of open, distance and digitalised education (ODDE) continues to redefine the landscape of higher education across the globe. As we move further into 2025, the continued interplay between technological advancement, educator and learner competencies and the psychological and social dimensions of teaching calls for ongoing critical examination. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence, immersive virtual reality platforms and adaptive learning systems has accelerated the transformation of educational delivery methods while simultaneously raising new questions about digital equity, authentic assessment and the preservation of human connection in learning environments. Recent global initiatives promoting digital inclusion and sustainable development goals have further emphasised the urgency of understanding how ODDE can effectively serve diverse populations while maintaining educational quality and fostering innovation. The articles featured in this issue collectively address these emerging themes, providing timely insights and evidence-based recommendations to guide institutions, educators and policymakers in navigating the complexities of contemporary ODDE.

A central thread running through several contributions is the critical role of digital competence in shaping effective online education. While digital literacy is often assumed to be synonymous with productivity, the study by [Mardiana and Yakub \(2025\)](#) highlights that its impact is far from straightforward. Their mixed-methods research demonstrates that digital literacy, in isolation, is insufficient for enhancing teaching productivity; rather, it is the integration of digital competence with supportive work behaviour that yields meaningful improvements in online teaching. This finding underscores the necessity for professional development initiatives that address not only technical skills but also behavioural and motivational factors, reminding us that the human element remains foundational in digital education.

The importance of fostering holistic development in educators is further emphasised in research by [Fairos \(2025\)](#), who investigates how spirituality mediates the relationship between principal leadership and pre-service teacher efficacy in ODDE environments. By conceptualising spirituality as encompassing meaningful work, community and alignment with organisational values, the study brings new depth to our understanding of teacher development. The findings suggest that leadership strategies, which nurture these spiritual dimensions can enhance teacher efficacy, an insight particularly relevant as institutions seek to build supportive, values-driven cultures amidst the challenges of remote teaching.

As ODDE increasingly aligns with national and global priorities, questions of workforce readiness and sustainable industry engagement come to the forefront. [Juasiripukdee et al. \(2025\)](#) address this by examining the competencies required for open university students in Thailand to thrive in the sustainable smart manufacturing sector. Their research reveals



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significant gaps between industry expectations and current student capabilities, particularly in advanced technological and green skills, and calls for urgent curriculum reforms. The study's multi-dimensional competency framework provides a clear roadmap for educators and policymakers seeking to bridge the divide between academic preparation and the evolving demands of the labour market.

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into educational practice is another area of rapid growth and scholarly attention. [Rafiq and Ahmad \(2025\)](#) mixed-methods investigation delves into the nuanced relationship between AI usage, student creativity and psychological well-being in ODDE contexts. Their findings highlight that AI not only directly fosters creativity but also exerts an indirect influence through its positive impact on student happiness. This mediating effect of well-being points to the broader importance of addressing emotional and psychological factors beyond mere technological adoption in maximising the benefits of digital innovation for learners.

In parallel, the evolving research landscape of online teaching success is mapped by [Withorn et al. \(2025\)](#) through a comprehensive bibliometric and content analysis. Their synthesis of 15 years of scholarship reveals both the dynamism and the limitations of current research trends: while technological themes have dominated recent discourse, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains a need for greater attention to pedagogical questions and increased collaboration among researchers. The identification of nine key research themes offers a valuable agenda for future inquiry, advocating for a balanced approach that integrates digital advances with pedagogical integrity and stakeholder engagement.

The perspectives of postgraduate students on teacher-written feedback are brought to the fore by [Budiman \(2025\)](#), who employs qualitative methods to explore the impact of formative feedback on academic writing in online settings. The study demonstrates that individualised, meaningful feedback not only enhances writing competency but also strengthens motivation and self-esteem, especially for students with limited academic writing experience. This work reinforces the centrality of constructive feedback in distance education, highlighting its role in bridging the communicative divide between students and instructors.

Finally, the connection between health promotion and teacher performance is explored by [Erlina et al. \(2025\)](#) who assess the efficacy of the Sustainability-Based Action Teacher (SuBAT) model in a distance learning context. Their quasi-experimental study shows that integrating health literacy with professional competencies leads to measurable improvements in both physical health and teaching performance. The results point to the value of holistic intervention models that address the full spectrum of teacher well-being, from physical and cognitive health to motivation and self-expectation.

Taken together, the research presented in this issue paints a rich and multifaceted picture of the current state and future directions of online and distance learning. The articles demonstrate that while technological innovation remains at the heart of ODDE, human factors (e.g. competence, well-being, leadership and meaningful feedback) are equally indispensable. These studies arrive at a particularly crucial juncture as educational institutions worldwide grapple with post-pandemic recovery, evolving student expectations and the integration of emerging technologies like generative AI and metaverse platforms. The findings presented here offer valuable frameworks for addressing contemporary challenges such as maintaining student engagement in hybrid learning environments, ensuring equitable access to digital resources and developing sustainable models for professional development in rapidly changing technological landscapes. As institutions around the world strive to adapt to the rapidly changing educational environment, the evidence and insights offered here provide practical guidance and inspiration for building more effective, equitable and sustainable systems of learning.

We invite readers to engage deeply with the scholarship presented in this issue, reflect on its implications for their own contexts and contribute to the ongoing evolution of open and distance education in a digital era. The research presented here not only addresses current challenges but also anticipates future developments in ODDE, providing a foundation for

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