



مؤسسة عبدالله الغرير للتعليم
Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education

Planning for Online Learning in Tertiary Education in the UAE

University Consortium for Quality Online Learning
Project Phase I: Institutional Capacity Needs Assessment

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The University Consortium for Quality Online Learning

The University Consortium for Quality Online Learning (UCQOL) was founded in 2020 by the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education in collaboration with the UAE Ministry of Education (MoE) and nine leading universities in the United Arab Emirates. UCQOL aims to strengthen existing online¹ programs, develop high-quality online courses and programs, and make them more accessible to learners.

The partnership and commitment of the MoE has played a key role in fostering the success of the consortium and accelerating the journey towards wider access to accredited high-quality online higher education. This is also the first time that nine of the most reputable and highly ranked institutions in the UAE elected to work together to develop high-quality online education.



¹ We use the term online to mean learning that includes an online component but is not necessarily 100% online such as hybrid learning and hyflex learning.

The University Consortium for Quality Online Learning

There is no one-size-fits-all approach for the universities. The consortium devised a multi-phased project that embedded change management and differential focus in its work.



Phase 1

Capacity
Needs
Assessment
(2021)



Phase 2

Training &
Capacity
Building
(2021-2023)



Phase 3

Online Program
Development &
Accreditation
(2022-2023)



Phase 4

Online Program
Evaluation/Project
Expansion
(2022-2023)

To implement Phase 1, the Foundation partnered with the international expert team at Instructional Design for E-Learning (IDEL) to conduct the needs assessment of each university and present recommendations. The assessment identified the strengths and opportunities for introducing quality online learning in higher education institutions across the country and determined the university's readiness to offer high-quality online courses and programs in the near future. It also assessed the gaps between the available and required capacities for each university.

Following the needs assessment, the Foundation worked with IDEL to offer each institution a series of learning sessions to build internal capacity of faculty and staff who will be developing and implementing the online courses and programs. As part of the second phase, the team is currently working with the universities on faculty training, course design and production support, building out their online ecosystems and the development of a collaborative community of practice among the institutions.

This paper summarizes the key findings of the needs assessment and highlights the main takeaways that can inform post-Covid online learning in other institutions of higher education (HEIs) in the UAE and the region and serve as an example of a national model. It also supports HEIs in gaining a better understanding of the requirements and capacities needed to deliver online learning in an ever-changing educational environment, characterized by new expectations and mandates for flexibility and access.



Phase 1 Needs Assessment Process

The international team of online learning specialists in online learning set out to assess the relevant capacity and resources across the nine universities. During the 3-month needs assessment, the team utilized a sequential explanatory research design consisting of the following steps.



Phase 1- Needs Assessment Process



Stakeholder identification

The team conducted stakeholder mapping meetings to identify the most relevant participants within each university at the institutional, departmental, and course levels.



Development and implementation of an inventory resources survey

The survey consisted of **214 questions** designed to establish a baseline understanding of the policies, procedures, and resources in place for online learning at each university.



Documents and evidence collection

The team systematically analyzed 600 documents, resources, and processes shared by the stakeholders, in alignment with the inventory resources survey to validate the responses shared and objectively assess each institution's readiness.



Interview and focus groups

Following the survey, the team held 18 interviews with university stakeholders to clarify outstanding questions and gain a qualitative perspective on each university's readiness to pursue online learning.

Key Takeaways

The analysis of the needs assessment data led to specific takeaways for the participating universities that we believe other HEIs should consider if they are transitioning out of ERT or considering formalizing online content. To meet the goal of ensuring quality online learning in higher education in the UAE and globally, it is vital to ensure that universities have the expertise and resources in place to create thriving online learning programs through these next steps and phases of the project.



**Market Analysis
and Program Identification**



**University Internal Review
of Policies and Procedures**



Faculty/Staff Training



**Invest in Course Production
Personnel and Processes**



**Leveraging
a Consortium of HEIs**

1. Market Analysis and Program Identification

A market analysis creates informed decisions for program identification.

Following the consortium's goals, a market analysis focusing on specific university needs could assist institutions in deciding which programs to move online first. The market analysis must address three key areas: target population, type of program to deliver online, and existing market data. Identifying which programs to move online is a key determinant for institutions to be able to move forward. The first recommendation for UCQOL universities and any other HEI in a similar position is to carry out a market analysis, focused on specific university needs first.

2. University Internal Review of Policies and Procedures

Universities should conduct internal reviews of policies and processes.

To support their online learning programs, universities may conduct thorough internal reviews of policies and processes. This includes a formal review of their ERT processes and guidelines, formalizing existing processes and identifying new policies, and inclusion of faculty and staff in decision-making processes.

3. Faculty/Staff Training

It is critical to train faculty and other staff to deliver effective online programs.

According to the needs assessment data, several UCQOL universities have some resources to develop and build online courses, as well as train faculty on LMS, online learning, and pedagogy design. However, even after the ERT training, many faculty and staff requested additional guidance, specifically on designing online courses, signaling that more training may be required.

4. Invest in Course Production Personnel and Processes

To improve the quality of online learning content, it is essential to invest in Course Production Personnel and Processes.

It is important to invest in course production personnel and processes in the future to grow and maintain online learning visions in the region. Universities may invest in resources like these and seek to improve their understanding of how to use them to deliver engaging and effective online courses. For instance, universities may hire internal personnel with specific skills and experience to produce effective online learning content and gain a better understanding of online course production as well as IT infrastructure maintenance. Alternatively, university leadership may opt to collaborate with external stakeholders for additional support.

5. Leveraging a Consortium of HEIs

The consortium can be leveraged to support online learning in member institutions.

The results of the needs assessment affirm that several universities need various levels of resources to achieve their online learning goals. UCQOL and other comparable associations, whether on the institution or faculty level, will help meet these needs by creating a pool of shared resources and personnel for members' use.

Strengths and Opportunities

This section presents an overview of the aggregated data for the nine universities and the identified strengths and opportunities. These were organized into 8 distinct areas, each with a critical role in a university's readiness to achieve its online learning vision.

The areas include:

1. Vision and Strategy
2. Organizational Structure
3. Faculty Readiness
4. Instructional Design and Media
5. Technology and Infrastructure
6. Learning Management Systems and Tools
7. Student Outreach and Recruitment
8. Student Support and Community



Identified Strengths

The top 3 identified strengths in online learning readiness at the universities are:



1. Faculty Training

In light of the global pandemic and sudden urgency to instruct remotely, all 9 universities had some form of faculty Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) training in online learning. However, most universities were uncertain about whether these ERT pieces of training, which were in varying stages of research, evaluation, and development, would be adapted for more formal, future use. As such, this training provision was both a strength and an opportunity for every university. Training programs provided ranged from day-long workshops to week-long seminars, and from mandatory training at some universities to optional ones at others.



2. Technology and Infrastructure

The assessment found that all universities offered some level of tech support for staff, faculty, and students via phone, email, video conferencing, and other means. Various participants expressed confidence in their university's IT infrastructure and mentioned that its accessibility adequately prepared faculty and staff for teaching. Some universities implemented long-term plans in response to the pandemic, while others relied on existing systems. Most universities also intend to take further steps to promote future online learning and integrate it into their systems.



3. Learning Management System

All universities had a functioning learning management system (LMS) through which they administered course information. Most universities could integrate other tools and technologies into their LMS and use them for scaling. Another consistent and repeating strength was the ability of the IT departments to support the technical needs of the university members as they ventured into emergency remote teaching during the pandemic. Apart from the LMS, participants stressed the necessity of having access to an IT infrastructure that allowed their institutions to handle and respond to support queries; long-term LMS operation and user experience was also cited as a strength.

Opportunities for Growth

The top four areas for growth opportunities for universities are outlined below.



1. Vision and Strategy

University stakeholders were aware of the importance of online learning policies and procedures, as well as the pandemic's impact on their transition to online learning. However, none of the nine universities had formal, university-wide online learning policies and procedures in effect before the pandemic or at the time of the needs assessment. Only three of the universities had existing online learning policies and procedures that were formed as ERT policies in response to the pandemic. All universities now need to plan, adapt, formalize, and adopt comprehensive online policies and procedures to align with the national vision and commit to serving students online and on campus.



2. Student Support and Community

Only 7 of the nine universities had comprehensive online learning support systems to accommodate online learners. A holistic online learner support system should aim to provide services spanning the entire journey of an online learner, including registration, academic, mental/physical health, and graduation support. While holistic support may be available to in-person/on-campus students, it is essential to implement ways to support e-learners by developing a system that caters to their needs and provides them with a well-rounded online learning experience.



3. Instructional Design and Media

Universities identified equipment and personnel as areas of opportunity for producing high-quality online content. Most of the universities lacked the essential personnel that would be needed for high-quality production, as well as a dedicated production space. The universities that lacked production equipment will need to find solutions to produce online content, courses, and programs at the requisite standard to meet the UAE's national vision for higher education.



4. Faculty Training

Faculty training, previously mentioned as a strength by some universities, was also mentioned as an area for growth. Only two out of the nine universities had formalized online learning training; the rest had varied but inconsistent policies around ERT faculty training.



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مؤسسة عبداللّٰه الغرير للتعليم
Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education

Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation for Education is one of the largest privately funded philanthropic education initiatives in the Arab world, devoted to equipping Arab youth with the knowledge and skills they need to become future leaders of the Arab region. The Foundation aims to prepare young Emiratis and Arabs to fulfil their potential through access to quality education through strategic partnerships. The Foundation also aims to make investments in innovative educational initiatives to improve the quality of education in the Arab region and scaling innovation and best practices.






WE SUPPORT





IDEL was formed out of a need for pedagogically sound training in instructional design specifically tailored for online and blended learning environments. As a working group of the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLCC), an organization focused on developing quality connected learning solutions for displaced populations and their host communities, IDEL was able to draw on the knowledge and experience of its members and their respective organizations. Globally, the team's institutions work together to design, promote, and deliver high-quality e-learning while strengthening local capacity for scalable delivery.

Appendix A: Needs Assessment Areas Covered

Area	Key Questions
 Vision and Strategy	To what extent is the institution's vision for online learning well-articulated and reflected in a coherent strategy?
 Organizational Structure	To what extent does the institution's organizational structure and business model support the growth of online learning?
 Faculty Readiness	To what extent are faculty open, trained, and incentivized to support the growth of institution's online learning vision?
 Instructional Design and Media	To what extent are the instructional design and media production resources and processes effective and scalable enough to support the design and development of high-quality courses?
 Technology and Infrastructure	To what extent are the institution's technology and infrastructure systems effective and scalable enough to support a large online community of learners?
 Learning Management Systems and Tools	To what extent are the learning management systems and learning technology tools effective and scalable enough to support the delivery and management of online content for residential and online community of learners?
 Student Outreach and Recruitment	To what extent are marketing, student outreach, and recruitment resources and processes effective and scalable enough to attract and manage a large pipeline of online learners?
 Student Support and Community	To what extent are the student support resources and processes available and scalable enough to enable the success of a community of online learners?