Online Instructor-Led Pilot Course on Monitoring and Evaluation of Substance Use Prevention Interventions and Policies: Experiences and Perceptions of International Participants

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INTRODUCTION: As the prevalence of substance use continues to rise all over the world amidst the ongoing pandemic, substance use prevention professionals are challenged to find alternative ways to enhance their knowledge and competence to use the best practices in the field. In the present global health situation, in which running face-to-face training seminars is extremely difficult, the most feasible option is through online learning. The aim of this study is to explore how the different aspects of a substance use prevention online course affected the overall effectiveness of the programme. **METHODS:** A mixed-methods design was used in the study. A pre- and post-course test, as well as a Satisfaction Survey, was administered and statistically analysed. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted online via Zoom with 14 international participants out of the total of 30 participants who attended the pilot online course. The FGDs were transcribed and analysed according to themes and sub-themes. **RESULTS:** The analysis of the pre- and post-test scores revealed a significant difference in scores among those who took the course. The evaluation scores for the content and delivery of the learning sessions were above average, with a high mean of three out of a maximum score of four. Three major themes emerged in the FGDs. These were enabling factors, barriers affecting learning, and recommendations for improvement. **CONCLUSIONS:** This study provided a holistic quantitative and qualitative assessment of essential aspects of the transformed virtual course on evaluating and monitoring substance use prevention interventions. It also identified aspects of the course which need further improvement and enhancement.

Keywords | Drug Prevention – Drug Professionals – Online Learning – Monitoring – Evaluation

1 INTRODUCTION

The UN World Drug Report 2021 reports that the number of substance users around the world is projected to climb by as much as 11 per cent by the year 2030. In Africa alone, the expected increase in the number of substance users is as much as 40 per cent because the population is younger and substance use is higher among young people. The estimated number of substance users in Africa is 60 million. Asia, on the other hand, has an estimated number of substance-using individuals of 80 million and a staggering increase of close to 80 per cent was reported from 2018 to 2019 alone (UNODC, 2021).

Substance use prevention is the key to controlling the astronomical rise in the number of individuals engaged in substance use, but the availability of addiction professionals and trained health workers in resource-poor countries remains disproportionate to the demands of the times. In Africa, for example, the ratio of mental health workers in the general population is at a median rate of 1.4 per 100,000 people (Sankoh et al., 2018). While a new health crisis brought about by COVID-19 is negatively impacting on the well-being of people, there is an immediate need to shift gears in order to continually meet the human resource challenge of the addiction epidemic.

In response to the global need for continual dissemination of the Universal Curricula (UC) in Drug Prevention, the Colombo Plan Drug Advisory Programme (DAP) embarked on a transformation project. This project aimed to convert the Universal Prevention Curriculum for Substance Use – Managers and Supervisors (UPC-M&S) Series from the existing in-person (face-to-face) English and Spanish versions to an online format. Undeniably, the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2020 led to all the face-to-face UPC courses coordinated by DAP, including the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) course in this series, being put on hold. The deferral of the face-to-face format was an opportunity to consider offering the course using a blended learning approach through a virtual platform. The transformation included adapting modular course activities relevant to the selected platform, providing scheduled synchronous sessions, revising asynchronous learning activities, and engaging the active participation of participants.

Online learning has grown in popularity and use with the advances in digital technology and the circumstances brought about by the recent pandemic (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Corrigan & Kovatch, 2020; Gegenfurtner et al., 2020). Online learning is more of an umbrella term referring to webinars, e-learning, distance learning, internet-based programmes, etc. The combination of asynchronous systems and synchronous webinars to complement each other's strengths and minimise the disadvantages is termed blended online learning (Power, 2008). Speaking of strengths, many studies have pointed out that online learning can be just as effective when compared to traditional face-to-face classes (Champion et al., 2013; Ebner & Gegenfurtner, 2019; Gegenfurtner et al., 2020; Hosseini et al., 2021; McKinney, 2017). Student satisfaction with online learning is also equally close to the level of satisfaction with the traditional classroom set-up (Ebner & Gegenfurtner, 2019; Gegenfurtner et al., 2020; Yo et al., 2021). Students and trainees see online learning as a positive alternative to face-to-face classes because it offers flexibility (pace, schedule, and geography) and the accessibility of vast resources and saves on travel expenses (Champion et al., 2013; Gegenfurtner et al., 2020; McKinney, 2017; Sen et al., 2020; Yo et al., 2021). However, there are disadvantages or issues concerning an online avenue for learning. O'Doherty et al. (2018) noted that inadequate internet infrastructure, time constraints, and poor technical skills serve as barriers to effective online learning. Moreover, the use of online platforms depends heavily on stable internet connections and if this requirement is not met, online learning becomes difficult or even impossible (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Sen et al., 2020; Yo et al., 2021). Calder et al. (2017) also pointed out that studying the quality of online learning is complicated because of the variability of content, format, participants, and academic level. The pandemic may have dramatically shifted the course of providing instruction but that also suggests a lack of evaluation of the booming reliance on online education programmes (Corrigan & Kovatch, 2020). There is also no single way of teaching courses online and best practices in online learning have yet to be established (Gegenfurtner et al., 2020).

This study aims to identify the overall effectiveness of the online pilot course by qualitatively identifying and describing the strengths of the programme and the factors which act as barriers to effective learning among the participants. Moreover, this study aims to quantitatively measure the effect of the course on increasing the knowledge among the participants after completing the modules. The degree of satisfaction expressed by the participants with the different aspects of the course is also explored.

2 METHODS

2.1 Online M & E course on substance use prevention

The online training on the M&E course aims to address the need for knowledgeable and competent professionals who are working in substance use prevention programming globally. This online version was developed by Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, FLACSO) in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The entire pilot course lasted nine weeks, and on-demand modules were available for viewing throughout this period. The synchronous sessions were facilitated by a trainer, a Course Coordinator, and Help Desk Support Staff. The platform used was the HealtheKnowledge (HeK) online learning portal, which is managed by the Collaborative to Advance Health Services at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Nursing and Health Studies.

Participants

The online pilot class consisted of 30 participants from different countries in Africa and Asia. Participants were recruited through online announcements from DAP (Colombo Plan) and invitations to non-governmental organisations and govern-

ment agencies involved in drug demand reduction activities. These participants were organised into six study teams whose countries of origin were more or less adjacent to each other, meaning that the time difference was smaller.

Prior to the pilot, DAP had posted an advertisement on the ISSUP website as well as Facebook and Instagram about this pilot course and others in this training series. Interested individuals filled in an online application form indicating the course of their choice and sent in their CV separately. The Review Committee at CP-HQ reviewed all the applications and selected those who met the eligibility criteria.

2.2 Evaluation research design

A mixed-methods approach consisting of quantitative measures and qualitative inquiry was used to evaluate the online content and online delivery of this M & E course.

2.2.1 Quantitative method

Prior to the start of the course modules, the participants were asked to answer a pre-test questionnaire during the first synchronous orientation session. The pre-test questionnaire was administered online. Soon after the participants had completed the seventh or last module, the last synchronous session was conducted, during which they were asked to answer the post-test questionnaire. A course satisfaction survey was also administered online to evaluate the content and process of learning delivery of the course.

Participants

A total of 25 participants out of 30 were able to complete the pre- and post-test questionnaire. Twenty-two were able to complete the Satisfaction Survey.

Instruments

The test questionnaire consisted of 20 multiple-choice items. The total score is 100 points, with each item being equivalent to five points. All items were directly related to the content of the course and covered the seven modular topics. This included data collection methodologies, the monitoring and evaluation process, working with evaluation consultants, prevention interventions, and policies and application to practice. The same questionnaire was administered after the course.

The Satisfaction Survey consisted of ten four-point Likert-scaled items (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). The survey asked the participants to evaluate the course objectives, activities, methodology, participant's manual, and other learning tools.

2.2.2 Qualitative method

A qualitative method was employed to deeply explore the experiences of participants from the first to the final module of the programme. Two online focus group discussions (FGDs) were

conducted. The Zoom platform was used in both FGDs. The objectives of the FGDs were explained to all participants during the last plenary learning session, held two weeks before the actual FGDs. In total, 15 participants out of 30 joined the FGDs. They signed the consent form at least two days prior to or on the day of the FGD. The two FGDs were conducted separately on different dates. The first FGD consisted of six participants who were the group coordinators for their respective groups. In both FGDs, no incentives were provided, as stipulated in the consent form. Both FGDs lasted 90 minutes.

An interview through email was conducted with the overall DAP coordinator to provide background information and context to the online programme being evaluated, and another with the HelpDesk Support personnel to solicit information on what type of technical-related assistance was requested by participants.

Procedures

A total of 14 participants joined the focus group discussions (FGDs). The six group coordinators attended the first FGD, while eight regular participants attended the second FGD. The group coordinators were elected by their individual groups to coordinate communication among the members throughout the duration of the pilot course and to serve as a liaison with the Resource Team. The second FGD consisted of participants who did not play any administrative role in the class. One participant (B3) in the second FGD had to leave early because of an emergency. Those who participated in the first FGD were named Group A and were assigned codes such as A1, A2, etc. Those in the second FGD were Group B and were likewise coded in the same manner: B1, B2, etc. In Group A four males participated out of the total of six. Four of them were from Africa, coming from Nigeria (n = 1), Uganda (n = 2), and Ghana (n = 1). Also represented were the Philippines (n = 1); and India (n = 1). In Group B, five were females and three were males. Five participants came from African countries – Nigeria (n = 1), Uganda (n = 2), South Africa (n = 1), and Kenya (n = 1) – while the others were from Barbados (n = 1), Bangladesh (n = 1), and the Philippines (n = 1). In both groups, many worked with the government, NGOs, or a university.

A written consent form was emailed to all those who agreed to participate and the signed form was returned before the FGD. Group discussions through Zoom were recorded, transcribed, and coded by the first author and the research assistant. The codes were reviewed according to the main themes and sub-themes under each category. The focus guide provided the a priori categories, which were further analysed into themes and sub-themes.

Instrument

The FGD Guide. The FGD guide consisted of two parts: (1) identification information, which included participant number, interviewer name, FGD date, and time of start/end, and (2) feedback questions on the course topics and learning exercises.

The FGD discussion guide revolved around five questions. These included: the personal information and individual characteristics and motivation of the participants; their overall experience with the learning activities and impressions of the course content; the online interaction among the participants; internet connectivity, and the recommendations of the participants. Only one facilitator moderated the discussion in the two FGDs. Although the FGD was recorded, she was assisted by a research assistant, a senior MA Psychology intern who documented the discussion.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Quantitative results

In order to assess the improvement of knowledge among the participants following the course delivery, pre- and post-tests were conducted. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants showed that there were more dips or low points in the pre-test knowledge scores compared to the post-test scores. Except for a few cases (n = 5), the participants scored relatively high in the pre-test. The baseline scores ranged from 85 to 100. The post-test scores were more even than the baseline scores and showed better scores than the former. Many post-test scores were in the range from 93 to 100.

A paired t-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the online UPC 3 course on the knowledge of the participants. There was a statistically significant increase in the Knowledge scores from the pre-test (M = 88.1, SD = 19.49) to the post-test (M = 96.41, SD = 8.311), t (23) = 2.07, p < .01. The mean increase in the Knowledge scores is 8.31. The eta squared statistic (0.16) indicated a large effect size of the course on knowledge outcomes.

The content of the course was evaluated using a four-point Likert scale satisfaction survey that was completed by 22 of the course participants. The results showed that the participants were very satisfied with the course content (M = 3.45, SD = 0.23), with the average scores per item ranging from 3.0 to 3.7. The items that had the highest average scores were *Course objectives are clearly stated* (M = 3.7), *The course content is relevant to my work* (M = 3.7), and *The participant manual is helpful and supports the coursework* (M = 3.6).

3.2 Qualitative results

The thematic analysis of the transcripts was combined for the two FGDs since the FGD questions were standard for both groups and were framed towards soliciting their perceptions and experiences while being exposed to the training intervention. All the tables in this section present the main themes and subthemes. Illustrative quotations from participants (with the corresponding code numbers) are listed in the last column of the table.

There were three major themes that emerged from the two FGDs. These themes were the enabling factors, the barriers to learning, and the recommendations to address the barriers and enhance the facilitating factors. The first theme, the enabling factors, relates to facilitating factors that affect the positive learning experience and contribute to the overall effectiveness of the online course. The second theme, the barriers to learning, identified the hurdles to the learning goals of the participants which impeded the effectiveness of the course.

The Enabling Factors

The participants were probed on the positive aspects of their overall learning experience with the online course and identified which of the factors enabled the course to deliver the learning inputs effectively. On top of the participants' motivation, the method used for the delivery of the programme was named as an important factor. A key word that was significantly expressed was flexible time. As one participant said, "flexibility is the best part of the course". This means that participants could conveniently fix their schedule for viewing the modules and completing the assignments according to how their work schedule permitted it.

Those who were clearly motivated to learn appreciated the course and shared very positive feedback. The novel format of the virtual course significantly excited the participants. Some words we heard were "enjoyed", "curious", "learned", and "hungry for information". The variety of methods applied in the virtual format, such as video lectures, a group forum, synchronous plenary discussions, and individual and group assignments kept them actively engaged. The personal impact of the modules in terms of their significant learning and insights helped reinforce this learning experience.

The online course consisted of seven modules. Content-wise, the topic most appreciated by the participants was the Logic Models. This topic was one of the core topics of the course and explained in detail the steps involved in designing an evaluation plan. Actually, all the participants had something good to say about the strengths of each module in terms of how it was delivered (see *Table 1*). Outside the asynchronous sessions, the participants were asked to meet with fellow-participants to discuss and submit a group assignment for particular modules. The participants liked this opportunity to interact with others because they learned tremendously from the perspectives and experiences of participants from other countries.

The practical nature of the course was also appreciated. As one participant mentioned, he could easily apply what he had learned. This immediate applicability of the M&E principles resonated with the majority of the discussants. According to them, the presentation was simple and its application to day-to-day work, as mentioned earlier, was easy.

The Barriers to Learning

It is expected in any pilot online course that challenges concerning the way it is structured and delivered will be experienced. The menu of activities was perceived by some participants as

Online Instructor-Led Pilot Course on Monitoring and Evaluation of Substance Use Prevention Interventions ...

ADDICTOLOGY 188
ADIKTOLOGIE

Table 1 | Enabling factors

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Quotes
Motivation	Personal motivation	*It was me personally who wanted to learn.* (A3)
	Career growth	*I want the course because it is in line with what I'm doing.* (B4)
		I am a prevention coordinator so I have always wondered how to do the M&E (B2)
		I saw the value of M/E for all of our programmes and interventions (B8)
		We were hungry for information (B8)
	Support from Management	*It is my boss... that shared with me the link and encouraged me to apply* (A5)
		I also got their support, morally. (A3)
Programme delivery	Flexible	*The best part of the course for me is the flexibility* (A2)
Course content	Practical Curriculum	*I could apply whatever I was getting here* (A5)
		We can actually be operational with the information we received. (B8)
	Strengths of modules	*The logic module was wow! I have never come across it before.* (B1)
		Mod 1—it set the tone (B8)
		Mod 3—an overview about different research methods (B6)
		Mod 7—the project because it was bringing everything together (B4)
		Data collection and methods. (B7)
		Mod 6 helped me to review all the systems and understand all the resources that you need. (B4)
Impact	Positive Impressions	*It was quite exciting* (B4)
		Very, very intense but enjoyed it all (B8) *We were quizzed on stuff—I really enjoyed* (B8)
		I was eager for more information on what's next. (B4)
	Significant Learning	*What I learned from this course is that you should be doing the evaluation and monitoring right at the start* (B4)
		M & E Plan: If I am given a chance in our organization, I can do it. (B5)
Help Desk	Quick Response	*The instructors...were able to switch all our fears and tried to see what they can do.* (A2)
	Type of help sought	*Logging in.*
		How to access the platform

too intense. While attending the course, all the participants were working full-time, quite a number of them from home. On the average, each participant had to devote four hours to asynchronous learning per week. This partly explained why some could not cope with the stress of listening to the lectures and doing work at the same time, not to mention the internet issues they had to deal with. As may be gleaned from *Table 2,* one participant expressed frustration about how difficult it was to balance the training hours and their current job. Any unanticipated event at home, such as personal illness or sickness in the family, acted as an additional obstacle to timely compliance with the course requirements. Another notable problem experienced by some participants was adjusting to the level of competency and self-confidence demanded in navigating through the virtual platform. As one participant commented, "it was not clear how to use the platform".

Most participants who wanted to keep up with the activities also shared problems related to connectivity. "The number one challenge is the network", quipped one participant. The flexibility of the on-demand schedule saved most of the participants except for two and in some ways prevented high attrition.

It was observed, moreover, that some instructional video content did not match the rich content of the materials. The video lecture was seen as too short compared to the breadth of information found in the resource materials. There was also a module (the one on Data Collection Methodologies) that was found to be cognitively demanding. According to one participant,

Table 2 | Barriers to learning

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Quotes
Challenges	Schedule	*It was difficult for me to do two hours of UPC* (B4)
		Very difficult to balance (the training) and my job (B5)
		I have two jobs (B6)
		It was quite difficult to cope with the coursework. (B7)
		Time difference (B1)
Connectivity	Disruptions/Delays	*The number 1 challenge is the network* (A2)
		Early hours in Barbados like 3,4 hrs.) before I get a response from the team. (B8)
Platform Navigation	Familiarisation	*We should be given some time to get familiarised with the platform* (A3)
	Technical Issues	*Method for using the module is not clear*
		Progress bar is confusing. Submissions are not recognised.

splitting the module into two smaller modules would have made completing this particular module more manageable. Each module would take at least 60 minutes to 180 minutes to complete. A template for an M&E plan was also missing, which participants felt should have been presented and explained in the lectures or through a special synchronous session.

The synchronous sessions were observed to be too far apart. There was a desire to make the sessions more frequent and that they should include live lectures to enhance or explain the video lectures. Over a span of nine weeks, a total of three synchronous sessions were conducted, with an average interval of about three weeks between each of them.

Recommendations

The suggestions of the group coordinators and regular participants are shown in *Table 3.* There were two main themes that emerged in this area of interest. The first theme touched on the improvements that could be made currently with the online delivery of the course based on how they received it. The first suggestion was technical in nature. The participants felt that the organisers should improve the orientation of the virtual platform. This could be done through a longer orientation and a more detailed technical walkthrough by the technical support group. It was suggested that the orientation on accessing and navigating the online platform should take place one week before the actual training. The online HeK platform should have been pre-tested with the participants several weeks before the commencement of the pilot course. The problems encountered during the pilot would have been avoided and the challenges minimised if the online delivery had been pre-tested. Secondly, the confusion experienced by participants in tracking their progress (through the progress bar) where their performance was recorded through the platform was incongruent with the inputs actually accomplished. This was particularly anxiety-provoking since they were aiming to reach the finish line close to the deadline for earning a certificate. Thus, a technical error like this should be corrected in the future.

The second subtheme revolved around the course itself. The video content presented asynchronously should be enhanced by providing more or deeper treatment of the topic. The synchronous sessions could be designed in such a way as to enhance the basic learning gained from the videos. Small group discussions should be monitored closely by the faculty team by participating in some of these discussions. For the near future, an advanced level of the M&E course or a follow-up course that emphasises practice and/or internship was suggested. Finally, a comprehensive reassessment by the organisers should be conducted to reduce the problems likely to be encountered by the next batch of trainees.

● 4 DISCUSSION

The results of the quiz, the satisfaction survey, and the FGDs with the international participants of the M&E online pilot provided feedback on the strengths, weaknesses/challenges, and proposed solutions to a remote learning experience. Several factors emerged as important variables that affect the learning experience in a virtual environment for a universal prevention course for professionals. The nine-week virtual programme had a full range of activities outside the on-demand lectures which were evaluated in this study.

Moving beyond the traditional face-to-face training to meet the unique needs of participants during the pandemic is quite a formidable task (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Corrigan & Kovatch, 2020; Sen et al., 2020; Yo et al., 2021). One must respond to the diverse needs of target participants from different parts of the world. The need could be twofold: competency in navigating the electronic environment and competency in the subject matter. In this study

quite a number of the participants needed to have their hands held while learning to navigate the platform. There was no metric for measuring the competence of participants in navigating the electronic environment, but the support desk personnel were very busy during the opening week of the course.

Table 4 | Comparison of risk behaviour of adolescents in relation to BMI

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Quotes
Suggestions for improvements	Enhance video content	*The source material covers a lot of issues but when you come to the video, the video is very, very short.* (A4)
	Improve structure of modules	*I think there's a lot to take in in Module 2. It should be divided into two modules* (A3)
		I think a template is provided or a guidance; it would really make a great meaning. (A5)
		List the activities in each module and point out the aspect you need to select yourself (B1)
		Monitor asynchronous discussions in groups. (B7)
		Someone would be there to supervise and find out what they are doing is the right thing. (B5)
	Improve classroom process	*Let groups handle the data collection, group two other aspects* (B8)
		Opportunity to practise some of what we have learned (B7)
Future Course	Content	*Advanced M&E course* (A3)
		Follow-up course for us to practice. (B8)
		The synchronous are widely spaced. Bring it closer and maybe use a bit of that time and not just a review. (B7)
	Internship	*Opportunity for internship in other organisations.* (B5)
	Assessment of pilot course	*Everything should be reassessed again to see whether the challenges that we had would not be had by the next persons.* (A1)

Obviously, a low level of competence or lack of confidence in navigating the HeK platform hampered the participants' training journey and interfered with their learning process in spite of their having a high level of competency concerning the topic.

We found a relatively high level of baseline knowledge, which could be attributed to the professional or work background of the participants. Many of them were already employed in government institutions and NGOs which were involved in drug prevention and policy. The short duration of the course, the on-demand nature of the modules, and the learning-from-home arrangement worked very well with a group possessing this profile. It facilitated the cognitive learning process and, as expected, the participants were performing very well at the end of the course.

These observations tell us that the evaluation of the pilot course should go hand-in-hand with the piloting of the HeK platform and the course delivery, as well as the overall course management. These major aspects are not independent of each other. They enhance and complement each other on the one hand, and they drag down the effectiveness of each other on the other. The participants mentioned both positive and negative experiences with online learning, while the Resource Team also experienced challenges in providing a prompt service to participants from different corners of the word. It is the complex interaction among these components which affects the dynamics of the learning experience (Calder et al., 2017). Since this was a pilot course, adjustments are recommended in order to tap into the unique strengths of a virtual module with live synchronous and group discussions.

The main challenge faced by the Project Team is to provide learning outcomes that come near to the learning process achieved in a live classroom environment. There is always a learning gap that emerges when the two training approaches are compared (Calder et al., 2017; Champion et al., 2013; Ebner & Gegenfurtner, 2019; Gegenfurtner et al., 2020; Hosseini et al., 2021; McKinney, 2017). However, one can always take advantage of how one approach can foster knowledge and possibly enhance skills in comparison to the other. Unlike face-to-face training, the online learning process can be personalised, but this can be lonely at times and the chances to interact with peers are limited. While there are opportunities for a group forum or a group task, this does not happen on a daily basis. Peer-to-peer learning happens intermittently in an online format and much of it is not always ideal. A discussion with the coordinators who were responsible for organising group meetings shared problems with being able to find a mutually acceptable time for everyone to be present during Zoom meetings or during WhatsApp meetings.

The flexibility of the course in terms of allowing the participants to listen to the lectures when they are available also implies that a certain amount of self-discipline is demanded (Gelles et al., 2020; Gorbunovs et al., 2016). This is a major challenge for many multitasking participants since a flexible virtual format has to compete with emails, social networking, text messages, phone calls, or Netflix. The average number of hours per module is about four hours per week. Spreading out one hour three to four times a week was envisioned as an ideal spread. This lead time was still difficult for quite a number who were struggling with the virtual format and for those who were not

technologically confident at the beginning of the course. For those who were busy at work, weekends or evenings were the natural time for coursework. In other words, different personal experiences were observed with regard to the online format. Some found it easy to navigate and coped well with the requirements, while others panicked about how to proceed from the first module to the next. The assistance of the technical support personnel and the instructor during this time of difficulty are much commended. The prompt support provided by the staff could be a variable that must be expanded when a virtual programme like this is run again. However, the ideal arrangement is compromised if the technical support personnel must serve both Africa and Asia because the time zones are very different. It is recommended to expand the support so that each region or adjacent countries are promptly served by a technical expert. This is primarily to reduce the time lag in troubleshooting the technical issues faced by the participants. Another helpful suggestion is to allow one week for orientation on the platform before starting the main course. This option would be reassuring to those who were not confident about their technical abilities.

What was least expected was a suggestion for a more active role of the instructor and coordinator in monitoring and guiding small-group discussions among the different groups when they were working on their group assignments. The difficulty in meeting this expectation was the wide time difference between the Asian instructor and the African participants. The Asian instructor could call a meeting at 10 pm (Manila Time), which could just be about mid-afternoon in some African countries. There is indeed some wisdom in appointing two instructors and technical support personnel from two different regions and having the groups meet with those who are close to their country of origin as often as they can.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Transforming the traditional classroom training course into one suitable for a virtual classroom environment required much rethinking in terms of course content. This was reflected in the shorter number of hours devoted to each of the modules. It should be noted that the traditional face-to-face modality would have taken about seven to eight hours of daily lectures and group exercises for a duration of two weeks. Reducing each lecture module to two to three hours per day was a formidable task in terms of prioritising the topics in each module and deciding on how the topics should be delivered. The feedback was very satisfactory in spite of the structural adjustment. It was perceived as simple, practical, and comprehensible. The short version seemed to have its advantages and worked well for the professional participants who were busy at work and had very little time for training.

Methodology-wise, the course developers were successful in using learning strategies to design a well-rounded course that was engaging even if it was online. What was most appreciated was the social learning that arose from peer discussions and the interaction with the instructor during the synchronous sessions. This shows that a blended approach that allows the participants to interact with each other socially and ask questions or raise issues after a video lecture is still the preferred mode for learning. Active peer-to-peer learning was perceived as a necessary complement to passively listening to lectures using instructional videos.

The problem of internet connectivity was a common challenge among almost all the participants. This represents a major obstacle to achieving the pace of learning that the pilot course would have wished for. It is a challenge that is recognised but solving it is beyond the control of the course developers. They had tried their best to plan for the small parts of the modules to become as engaging as possible given the current virtual environment. An inclusion criterion that may be imposed when accepting participants in the future is the accessibility of the internet for the latter.

In summary, this study provided a metric and qualitative assessment of online training efforts in this area. It highlighted aspects which went well and aspects that need further improvements for a pilot course and an online platform to successfully achieve their objectives.

Online Instructor-Led Pilot Course on Monitoring and Evaluation of Substance Use Prevention Interventions ...

ADDICTOLOGY
ADIKTOLOGIE

192

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