

# Research on Optimization Strategies of Online Courses for Higher Academic Continuing Education Based on Learners' Needs

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## ABSTRACT

Online courses in higher academic continuing education are characterized by four salient challenges which are ill-defined curriculum orientation, homogenized curriculum development, mechanistic curriculum implementation, and unitary curriculum evaluation. The root cause of these issues lies in the misalignment between online course design and learners' inherent needs. Notably, adult learners engaging in online courses typically demonstrate significant individual variability, diverse value orientations, limited availability of learning time, and inadequate theoretical foundations. To elevate the quality of online course development, four key strategic directions should be prioritized for breakthroughs: (1) aligning with career development path to develop a practice-driven curriculum framework; (2) offering personalized learning options to strengthen self-directed learning through diversified resource provision; (3) optimizing interactive experiences to foster the co-creation of curriculum resources via collective intelligence; and (4) leveraging technological tools to implement diversified evaluation for assessing learning outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** Higher Academic Continuing Education; Online Courses; Learners' Needs.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher academic continuing education constitutes an integral component of higher education system. With the expanding scale of talent cultivation and improved service capacity, it has emerged as a cornerstone in serving the lifelong learning needs of the entire population (Gao, X. J. et al., 2021). However, compared to regular higher education, higher academic continuing education universally faces challenges such as the relatively low quality of enrolled students, insufficient educational investment, and imperfect management mechanisms. Within the broader education ecosystem, it remains a relatively underdeveloped segment (Chen, Q. F., 2020). Building a modern education system dedicated to lifelong learning for all has become a shared aspiration in the field of education. This places heightened demands on the practical models and developmental standards of higher academic continuing education, necessitating the urgent advancement of comprehensive reforms to break through challenges and attain high-quality development.

Online courses serve as a pivotal form and vehicle for learners pursuing higher academic continuing education, bearing core missions such as achieving educational objectives, nurturing professional talents, facilitating employment, and driving social development. However, their quality has long been subpar. Fundamentally, the development of existing online courses fails to fully address learners' needs. The mismatch and misalignment between online courses and learners' needs constitute a key factor contributing to the slowness and inefficiency in course development, thereby hampering the favorable momentum of high-quality development in higher academic continuing education.

These issues mainly fall into four categories. Firstly, ill-defined curriculum orientation. The development of online courses is misaligned with the nature and orientation of higher academic continuing education, leading to discrepancies in talent development goals, curriculum priorities, and educational philosophies. Secondly, homogenized curriculum development. The

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curriculum framework still blindly replicates counterpart courses from full-time education, being tethered to the existing disciplinary structure. On one hand, it involves copying and truncating online courses designed for full-time students, reducing higher academic continuing education to a diluted curriculum model. On the other hand, traditional offline courses are migrated to online platforms without substantive adjustments to their original structure, merely transferring offline teaching scenarios to the digital space. Thirdly, mechanistic curriculum implementation. This practice has oversimplified the connotation and denotation of online courses, reducing them to mere instructional video viewing. Teacher-centered lecturing and passive student listening remain the predominant mode of teaching delivery, which is dominated by traditional pedagogical approaches and devoid of meaningful innovation or reform. Fourthly, unitary curriculum evaluation. Learning outcomes of online courses are primarily assessed through metrics such as video viewing duration and test performance, with an overemphasis on measuring factual knowledge acquisition. This evaluation system suffers from a lack of diversity in dimensions, forms, and tools.

### Research Design and Approach

The research design and approach for studying online courses for higher academic continuing education involve a systematic and rigorous process to investigate the challenges and optimization strategies against the backdrop of the construction of a lifelong learning society. The objective is to systematically analyze the needs and characteristics of learners enrolled in online courses for higher academic continuing education, gain insights into the underlying reasons of effectiveness of current online courses, and thereby formulating targeted optimization measures for the development of online courses. The research data collected from existing literature, case studies, and organizational documents may be utilized. Ethical guidelines and protocols are followed for data collection, storage, and analysis.

### Needs and Characteristics of Learners in Higher Academic Continuing Education

Learners in higher academic continuing education are predominantly adult learners, with learning motivations and styles distinctly occupationally oriented. Their needs and attributes are mainly reflected in three aspects.

Firstly, Shaped by factors such as age distribution, educational background, occupational type, marital and parental status, and physical fitness, learners' value orientations fall into five categories:

qualification-oriented, expectation-oriented, interest-oriented, cognitive-oriented, and competence-oriented.

1. The qualification-oriented type takes obtaining academic qualifications or meeting higher promotion criteria and thresholds as its fundamental goal.
2. The expectation-oriented type is characterized by a strong emphasis on gaining others' recognition or fulfilling social expectations.
3. The interest-oriented type is driven by the spiritual pursuit of satisfying personal hobbies and interests.
4. The cognitive-oriented type reflects a desire to improve self-cognition and enrich social understanding.
5. The competence-oriented type prioritizes mastering new skills and methodologies.

For instance, qualification-oriented learners regard academic qualifications as a bargaining chip to enhance their human capital value or unlock upward mobility channels. Consequently, they are more focused on completing courses, passing assessments, and achieving academic advancement quickly and conveniently, leading to utilitarian learning motivations. In contrast, cognitive and competence-oriented learners place greater emphasis on professional development, with clear learning goals, strong self-directed learning awareness, high learning enthusiasm, and notable learning outcomes.

In reality, learners' value orientations are rarely unitary; instead, they are often the result of comprehensive considerations, presenting a blend of multiple orientations. Nevertheless, the predominant factor in their value orientation tends to directly influence their learning motivation, attitude, behavior, and process, thereby impacting learning outcomes.

Secondly, Time scarcity is a commonly cited practical challenge for learners in higher academic continuing education when participating in online courses. A survey conducted by scholars on a continuing education platform revealed that learners aged 21–40 account for 83% of the total (Yuan, S. W. et al., 2016). The vast majority of these learners are middle-aged and young working professionals, who are in the career adaptation and advancement stages (Leng, R. Z., 2023). Typically, they opt to engage in online course learning during their spare time. However, the increasingly competitive work environment has further exacerbated the conflict between work and study. Regardless of their motivations and needs, it is an undeniable fact that work encroaches on their leisure time and depletes their personal energy.

Particularly in certain fields, occupations, and positions, intense work-related stress has further reduced their limited learning time.

Moreover, most learners face the dual pressures of family and career. Their occupational attribution and family structure impose heavier work burdens, greater family responsibilities, and more stressful living conditions. Additionally, a certain proportion of learners are unemployed or retired. While not constrained by occupational or work-related commitments, they similarly confront other life-related responsibilities and pressures, such as preparing for exams or job hunting, supporting elderly family members, grand parenting, and dealing with physical or mental health issues, leading to prevalent time conflicts.

Thirdly, Compared with full-time education learners, those engaged in higher academic continuing education boast relatively profound social and life experiences. Most of them adhere to an objectivist epistemology, with their learning attitudes and behaviors characterized by passivity and negativity, and they tend to be overly reliant on the guidance provided by instructors(Qi, Y., 2022). They typically possess work experience in specific fields or industries. Their learning choices are distinctly driven by vocational application needs. However, hampered by their initial academic credentials and professional foundations, most learners have a relatively inadequate theoretical grounding. Furthermore, prolonged learning habits and practical experiences have fostered relatively stable, if not rigid, learning styles among these learners. The majority still adhere to an objectivist epistemology, demonstrating passive and inactive learning attitudes and behaviors, and being overly reliant on instructors' guidance. Their autonomy in formulating learning plans, reconciling work-study conflicts, allocating learning resources, selecting learning strategies, integrating tool application, and seeking timely feedback-as well as their awareness and capacity for innovation-remain to be further strengthened.

### **Needs-Aligned Optimization Strategies for Online Courses**

To address learners' needs, the optimization of online courses in higher academic continuing education can be pursued through the following avenues, with the aim of enhancing learners' learning experience and boosting learning effectiveness.

Firstly, align with career development and develop a practice-driven curriculum system. The conceptual bias that treats adult education solely as an extension or supplement to formal school education overlooks the practical needs of adult learners(Gao, Z. M.et al.,

2008), giving rise to a proliferation of highly homogenized online courses. Anchored in a problem-oriented framework, curriculum design should therefore emphasize core attributes such as practicality, applicability, vocational relevance, and industry alignment. Specifically, it should integrate in-depth and meaningful activities tailored to adult learners' social roles, professional contexts, and life experiences. It is imperative to fully explore classic cases and materials from specific fields and work scenarios. Guided by contextualized and modular projects and tasks, such courses can ignite learners' motivation, leverage their prior practical experience, and facilitate their engagement in participatory, experiential, and inquiry-based learning.

Secondly, Provision of personalized resources to underpin self-directed learning. Self-directed learning constitutes not only the primary learning approach for adults but also the distinctive characteristic that differentiates them from others(Guo, B. X., 2005).Currently, most online course models remain confined to the replication and reproduction of traditional courses(Wang, L. Y., 2004).). It is therefore imperative to break away from the rigid, one-size-fits-all curriculum supply model and construct a flexible, optional resource system. On one hand, efforts should be made to alleviate the work-study time conflict. Structured around individual knowledge points, micro-courses should be adopted with simplified operational requirements, catering to learners' practical need of engaging in mobile learning during fragmented time. On the other hand, proactive measures should be taken to expand curriculum resources, establish a diversified resource framework, and provide learners with opportunities and conditions for varied choices. This entails offering personalized learning services and support, thereby enhancing their sense of control and achievement in learning and facilitating their transition from passive knowledge reception to self-directed learning.

Thirdly, optimize interaction experiences and generate curriculum resources through collective intelligence. Notably, providing learners with diverse interactive vehicles and creating vivid interaction formats to sustain their positive psychological states directly influences the effectiveness of online courses. According to Connectivism learning theory, learning is not merely a process of knowledge digestion but also one of knowledge creation(Siemens, G., 2005). Individual learners' cognitive engagement reflects personal wisdom; by contrast, collective teaching interactions represent the convergence of group intelligence. Specifically, sustained and in-depth interactions serve dual purposes: they not only

facilitate the externalization of learners' tacit knowledge (both as a process and an outcome), but also act as a critical means to drive the generation and expansion of curriculum resources. In this regard, online course development should continuously upgrade interactive tools and skillfully leverage cutting-edge technological means such as artificial intelligence. Concretely, this involves providing learners with interactive media and functions-including information screening, content sharing, problem discussion, opinion negotiation, and achievement summarization to optimize teacher-learner interaction experiences and thereby endow the virtual space with greater authenticity and timeliness. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that while learners construct their own learning networks and knowledge frameworks in interactive environments, they also contribute to the reconstruction, creation, and generation of knowledge, thereby redefining the relationship between pre-designed and emergent curriculum content. Importantly, the processes and outcomes of learners' interactions address the limitations of teacher-centered curriculum development models. Consequently, extensive participation, collaborative cooperation, and joint construction by both teachers and learners can significantly enrich and expand existing curriculum resources.

Fourthly, utilize technological tools adeptly and assess learning outcomes through multiple approaches. Examinations and scores, as evaluation methods and criteria, possess certain directional properties and fulfill predictive judgmental functions. However, a single-dimensional evaluation approach struggles to fairly reflect the true state of learning. Conversely, under such a flawed orientation, the alienation of learners' learning objectives and behaviors occurs: obtaining a diploma becomes the sole purpose of learning, and score-oriented and outcome-driven tendencies give rise to a multitude of opportunistic behaviors such as mindless video browsing, passive logging-in, and plagiarism.

Notably, meaningful learning should focus on the improvement of learners' cognition and competence, manifested in the entire process and all elements of learning. Therefore, there is an urgent need to reform the evaluation paradigm. For one thing, emphasis should be placed on the role of formative assessment. Leveraging artificial intelligence tools, it is essential to timely collect, record, and monitor learning processes and progress, while providing prompt feedback. This enables learners to adjust their learning strategies appropriately and enhance their awareness

and capabilities in self-motivation, self-monitoring, self-regulation, and self-restraint.

For another, the forms of summative assessment should be enriched. In addition to traditional methods such as quizzes and examinations, learners should be allowed to submit diverse forms of achievements-including activities, cases, projects, reports, and multimedia works-based on their professional strengths, job characteristics, and practical experience. Correspondingly, the selection, conversion, and recognition of these achievements should be formally incorporated into the evaluation system.

### Conclusion

With the development of the intelligent industry and the upgrading of the economic foundation, lifelong learning is poised to become the fundamental learning paradigm in an intelligent society. Against this backdrop, how to render fragmented learning systematized, standardized, and even academicized has emerged as a matter of widespread concern among learners. Therefore, whether driven by the demand for career advancement, the improvement of thinking abilities, or the orientation of academic interests, these factors collectively constitute the inherent driving force for the sustainable development of higher academic continuing education.

Working learners constitute the primary target group of higher academic continuing education. Constrained by various factors such as limited learning time and venues, online courses have objectively become-and will remain for a long period to come-the dominant form of courses in higher academic continuing education. To promote the high-quality development of this field, it is imperative to construct a learner-centered online course ecosystem, optimize the learning support service system, enhance the flexibility and adaptability of courses, and improve the interactivity and personalization of the teaching process. These efforts aim to foster the cultivation of innovative, application-oriented, and technical talents, thereby making greater contributions to advancing the popularization and universalization of higher education, promoting educational equity, and driving economic and social development as well as the construction of a learning society.

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