FACULTY DEVELOPMENT FOR PROXIMITY: TRAINING TEACHERS AND TUTORS IN SYNCHRONOUS DIGITAL TEACHING AT PEGASO UNIVERSITY

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Double Blind Peer Review

Citation
Carruba, M. C., De Marco, E., & Dipace, A. (2026). Faculty Development for proximity: training teachers and tutors in synchronous digital teaching at Pegaso University. *Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics, 10*(4).

Doi:https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v1i4.1879

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gsdjournal.it
ISSN: 3103-5744

ABSTRACT
The CETAL Faculty Development at Pegaso University supports teachers and tutors in adopting a new pedagogical model centred on synchronous interactive teaching and the Class platform. Structured training pathways were designed for 319 tenured faculty, 70 adjunct lecturers, and 52 university tutors, covering synchronous session management, e-tivity design, and the full range of Class interactive tools — including real-time quizzes, breakout rooms, collaborative whiteboards, and participation analytics. Outcomes are remarkable: sessions regularly recording over 500 simultaneous active participants, and more than 1, 000 high-quality student–teacher interactions per day documented by the IT division. Student satisfaction levels are consistently high. This model fully enacts the university's strategic identity as a proximity institution — deeply relational yet entirely online — demonstrating that affective and pedagogical closeness can be intentionally designed, measured, and scaled through structured teacher training and technology-enhanced environments.

KEYWORDS
Faculty Development; synchronous teaching; digital affective literacy

Received 07-10-2026
Accepted 26-10-2026
Published 30-10-2026

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of online higher education has shifted the focus from technological access to the quality of teaching and learning in digitally mediated environments. As digital education has become a permanent component of higher education, attention has increasingly moved towards the professional competencies required to design engaging, interactive, and meaningful learning experiences (Martin et al., 2019; Rapanta et al., 2020).

Faculty development has consequently emerged as a strategic institutional priority. Research consistently demonstrates that effective online teaching requires considerably more than technological proficiency. Educators must develop competencies in instructional design, synchronous facilitation, collaborative learning, assessment, and the creation of teaching and social presence capable of sustaining student engagement (Baran & Correia, 2014; Wright et al., 2018; Caskurlu et al., 2020). These competencies require systematic institutional support through structured professional development initiatives rather than isolated technology training.

Recent developments in artificial intelligence have further transformed this landscape. Rather than replacing educators, generative AI is redefining their professional role, requiring new pedagogical expertise in orchestrating learning, facilitating interaction, designing authentic assessment, and critically integrating AI-supported educational practices (Long et al., 2025; Sejdiu, 2025). At the same time, international evidence indicates that many university teachers perceive an urgent need for institutional support and continuous professional development to integrate AI responsibly and effectively into their teaching practice (Digital Education Council, 2025).

Within the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000), teaching presence remains one of the strongest predictors of meaningful online learning. More recent studies have confirmed that instructor social presence, synchronous interaction, and active facilitation significantly enhance students' engagement, motivation, and sense of belonging in online higher education (Caskurlu et al., 2020; Shehzad & Charles, 2023). Emerging scholarship on pedagogical proximity further argues that educational quality in online universities depends less on physical co-presence than on the intentional design of relational, affective, and interactive learning environments (Themelis, 2022; Aires, 2025).

Within this perspective, Pegaso University has undertaken a comprehensive transformation of its online educational model through the activities of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CETAL). Moving beyond a predominantly asynchronous paradigm, the university has adopted a model centred on synchronous interactive teaching supported by the Class digital platform. This institutional innovation has been accompanied by a large-scale Faculty Development programme involving both academic staff and university tutors, recognising both groups as essential actors in fostering participation, pedagogical proximity, and student success.

This paper presents the design, implementation, and preliminary outcomes of this Faculty Development initiative. It argues that pedagogical proximity is not merely an intrinsic characteristic of face-to-face education but a professional competence that can be intentionally designed, cultivated, and scaled through structured faculty development, evidence-informed pedagogical practices, and technology-enhanced learning environments. By documenting the Pegaso University experience, the study contributes to current international debates on digital pedagogy, teacher professional learning, and institutional innovation in online higher education.

2. Institutional Context: From Distance Learning to a Proximity-Based Digital University

Over the last decade, online higher education has evolved from a model primarily focused on flexibility and access towards one that increasingly emphasises student engagement, interaction, and educational quality. Within this evolving landscape, universities are challenged to rethink not only their technological infrastructure but also the pedagogical practices that underpin digital teaching. While asynchronous learning remains an essential component of online education, growing evidence suggests that synchronous interaction can strengthen teaching presence, social connectedness, and students' sense of belonging when supported by appropriate pedagogical design (Garrison et al., 2000; Rapanta et al., 2020).

This transformation has also renewed attention to Faculty Development as a strategic lever for institutional change. Rather than being conceived as occasional training, Faculty Development is increasingly understood as a continuous, evidence-informed process that supports educators in improving teaching

practices, responding to educational innovation, and enhancing student learning (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Steinert, 2014; Beach et al., 2016). Recent studies further argue that, in digitally mediated higher education, professional development should integrate pedagogical, technological, and organisational dimensions, enabling teachers to redesign their instructional practices rather than simply adopt new digital tools (Baran & Correia, 2014; Wright et al., 2018).

Pegaso University has embraced this transformation by redefining its educational model around the concept of proximity. Rather than considering distance as a structural limitation, the university has adopted a pedagogical perspective in which relational closeness is intentionally cultivated through synchronous teaching, continuous interaction, and technology-enhanced learning environments. This strategic shift reflects the institutional vision of an online university where accessibility is combined with active participation, collaborative learning, and sustained dialogue between teachers, tutors, and students.

To operationalise this vision, the university introduced the Class platform as the core environment for synchronous teaching and established the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CETAL) as the institutional unit responsible for supporting pedagogical innovation. CETAL coordinates the design of teaching models, promotes evidence-informed educational practices, and delivers large-scale Faculty Development initiatives addressed to both academic staff and university tutors.

The transition from a predominantly content-delivery model to an interaction-centred approach required a substantial investment in professional development. The objective was not merely to familiarise educators with a new digital platform but to foster a shared pedagogical culture capable of transforming synchronous technologies into opportunities for active learning, dialogue, formative assessment, and pedagogical proximity. Faculty Development therefore became the key enabling strategy for implementing institutional change consistently across programmes and disciplines.

3. Developing Teaching Competence for Synchronous Online Education

The transition towards a synchronous and interaction-oriented model of online education required a comprehensive professional development strategy capable of supporting teachers and tutors in rethinking their pedagogical practices. Rather than focusing primarily on digital tools, the Faculty Development programme

designed by CETAL sought to strengthen the professional competencies required to design, facilitate, and evaluate high-quality synchronous learning experiences.
Consistent with contemporary perspectives on educational development (Steinert et al., 2016; Beach et al., 2016), the programme was conceived as a continuous process of professional learning in which pedagogical knowledge, instructional design, digital competence, collaborative practice, and reflective teaching developed simultaneously. Technology therefore became a means of enhancing pedagogy rather than the primary object of training.

3.1 Pedagogical Foundations

The programme draws upon complementary theoretical perspectives that conceive learning as an active, relational, and socially mediated process. The Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000) provides the conceptual foundation by integrating teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. These dimensions are complemented by the concept of pedagogical proximity, which emphasises that meaningful online learning emerges from intentionally designed educational relationships rather than physical co-location (Themelis, 2022; Aires, 2025).
Recent developments in digital pedagogy further suggest that the role of university teachers is evolving from knowledge transmission towards learning facilitation, interaction management, assessment design, and critical mediation of digital technologies. Consequently, developing teaching competence requires integrating pedagogical expertise with digital and relational competencies capable of sustaining active learning in synchronous environments (Trust et al., 2024).

Within this framework, synchronous teaching is conceived not as real-time lecturing but as an educational space where dialogue, collaboration, formative assessment, and shared knowledge construction become central dimensions of the learning process.

3.2 Professional Learning Pathways

The Faculty Development programme was designed to address the specific responsibilities of different educational professionals while maintaining a common pedagogical vision.
The initiative involved:

- 319 tenured faculty members responsible for course design and teaching;
- 70 adjunct lecturers teaching across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes;
- 52 university tutors supporting student guidance, mentoring, and learning facilitation.

Training combined seminars, practical workshops, peer discussion, guided experimentation, and hands-on activities using the Class platform. Participants progressively designed and implemented interactive learning activities directly transferable to their own teaching contexts, promoting reflective practice and continuous improvement.

3.3 Developing Teaching Competence

The programme focused on developing an integrated set of professional competencies considered essential for effective synchronous online teaching. Participants strengthened their ability to:

- design interactive synchronous learning experiences;
- facilitate collaborative learning and academic dialogue;
- develop pedagogically meaningful e-tivities;
- integrate formative assessment within live sessions;
- promote student participation through interactive digital tools;
- interpret learning analytics to support instructional decision-making;
- critically and ethically integrate AI-supported technologies into teaching practice.

Rather than encouraging the technical use of digital platforms, the programme emphasised pedagogically informed decision-making, ensuring that technological choices remained aligned with intended learning outcomes and student engagement.

3.4 Technology as Pedagogical Mediation

Within the programme, the Class platform was presented as a pedagogical ecosystem rather than simply a videoconferencing system. Faculty members and tutors learned to integrate real-time quizzes, polls, breakout rooms, collaborative

whiteboards, shared documents, participation analytics, and immediate feedback tools into coherent instructional designs.

This approach conceptualises technology as a mediator of pedagogical relationships rather than an educational goal in itself. The effectiveness of synchronous digital teaching therefore depends not on the technological environment alone but on teachers' professional capacity to orchestrate interaction, foster participation, and cultivate pedagogical proximity throughout the learning experience.

4. Teachers' Initial Expectations and Engagement with the Faculty Development Programme

Teachers' initial expectations regarding professional development programmes play a critical role in determining the effectiveness and uptake of institutional training initiatives (Steinert et al., 2016; Beach et al., 2016). At Pegaso University, the transition towards the new synchronous, interaction-centred didactic model required CETAL to design a Faculty Development pathway capable of reaching a large and heterogeneous teaching community within a compressed timeframe, while addressing the diverse expectations of tenured faculty, adjunct lecturers, and university tutors.

Monitoring data collected by CETAL on the population of tenured academic staff (n = 395, comprising Full Professors, Associate Professors, Researchers, and Fixed-Term Researchers across the Faculties of Human Sciences, Engineering and Computer Science, and Economics and Law) show that 314 teachers (79.5%) completed the training on the new Didactic Model, while 76 teachers had not yet completed it at the time of data extraction. Table 1 summarises participation by Faculty.

Faculty	Tenured staff (N)	Trained in Didactic Model (N)	% trained
Human Sciences	215	186	86.5%

Engineering and Computer Science	81	67	82.7%
Economics and Law	99	61	61.6%
Total	**395**	**314**	**79.5%**

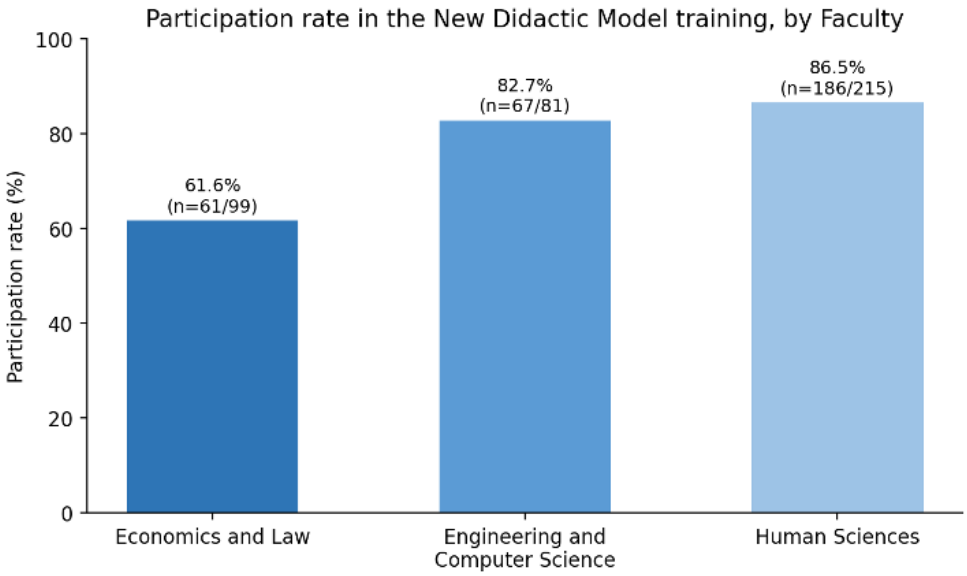


Figure 1: Participation rate in the New Didactic Model training, by Faculty.

Participation rates varied considerably across Faculties, ranging from 61.6% in Economics and Law to 86.5% in Human Sciences, suggesting that disciplinary culture, course-load distribution, and the scheduling of synchronous sessions during the summer period (25–30 July 2025) differentially affected teachers' ability to attend. In addition to the core training on the Didactic Model, CETAL monitored attendance at complementary pathways: 339 teachers completed the theoretical module on the new Assessment (docimological) Model, 334 completed the corresponding practical module, and a pilot group of 23 teachers took part in a guided simulation of a live synchronous session. A small group of teachers invited to the pilot simulation (n = 14) did not attend, and 53 teachers had not yet

completed any part of the assessment-model training, indicating residual training needs that CETAL is addressing through dedicated catch-up sessions.
Taken together, these figures confirm that, in line with the abstract, the Faculty Development initiative reached the large majority of the 395 tenured faculty members, in addition to the 70 adjunct lecturers and 52 university tutors targeted by the programme, while also revealing pockets of under-participation that require targeted follow-up actions to ensure homogeneous implementation of the new model across the institution.

5. Designing and Monitoring the Evaluation of Faculty Development

Professional development is increasingly conceived not as a one-off training event but as an iterative, evidence-informed cycle in which design, delivery, and evaluation continuously inform one another (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Steinert et al., 2016). Consistent with this perspective, CETAL accompanied the roll-out of the new Didactic Model with a structured monitoring and evaluation system, combining (a) administrative tracking of attendance across the different training modules, described in Section 4, and (b) an ex-post evaluation questionnaire administered to participants at the end of each workshop session, aimed at capturing their perceptions of training quality, relevance, and perceived impact on teaching practice.
This dual monitoring strategy allowed CETAL to triangulate quantitative participation data with self-reported perceptions, enabling the identification of both structural barriers to participation (e.g., scheduling, Faculty-specific constraints) and pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of the training design itself, as discussed in the following sections.

6. Methodological background

In order to detect and analyse the perceptions and expectations of teachers and tutors involved in the Faculty Development programme, CETAL designed an ex-post evaluation questionnaire administered electronically at the end of each training session held between 25 and 30 July 2025. The instrument combined closed and open-ended items and was completed anonymously by 148

participants, corresponding to an estimated response rate of over 30% of the teaching staff and tutors who attended the four monitored sessions.

The closed section of the questionnaire consisted of eight items rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree), exploring: (1) satisfaction with workshop planning; (2) relevance of the topics addressed to participants' teaching role; (3) clarity of trainers' exposition; (4) perceived improvement in knowledge of the topic; (5) trainers' ability to stimulate further interest; (6) adequacy of time allocated to the different activities; (7) participants' intention to transfer the methods presented into their own teaching; and (8) willingness to recommend the workshop to a colleague. The open-ended section invited respondents to describe the workshop with a single adjective, to indicate the two aspects they found most and least satisfactory, and to provide additional comments and suggestions for improvement.

Respondents were predominantly Researchers (45.3%, n = 67) and Associate Professors (32.4%, n = 48), followed by Full Professors (12.8%, n = 19) and a smaller group of adjunct lecturers, tutors, and administrative staff (9.5%, n = 14), reflecting the overall composition of the teaching population targeted by the training. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively (means and frequency distributions), while open-ended responses were examined through inductive thematic analysis, identifying recurrent categories related to perceived strengths, perceived limitations, and suggestions for future editions of the training.

7. Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings regarding the perceptions, expectations, and self-reported learning outcomes of teachers and tutors confirm that the Faculty Development programme was well received and perceived as pedagogically valuable, while also pointing to specific aspects that warrant refinement in future editions.

On the closed-ended items, mean scores ranged from 3.40 to 3.88 on the four-point scale, indicating a generally high level of satisfaction (Figure 2). Participants rated trainers' clarity of exposition most positively (M = 3.88), followed by the perceived relevance of the topics to their teaching role (M = 3.82) and overall satisfaction with workshop planning (M = 3.72). Notably, 83.8% of respondents fully agreed that the topics were pertinent to university teaching, and 88.5% fully

agreed that trainers' exposition was clear, corroborating the qualitative finding that "clarity" (chiarezza) was by far the most frequently mentioned strength of the training.

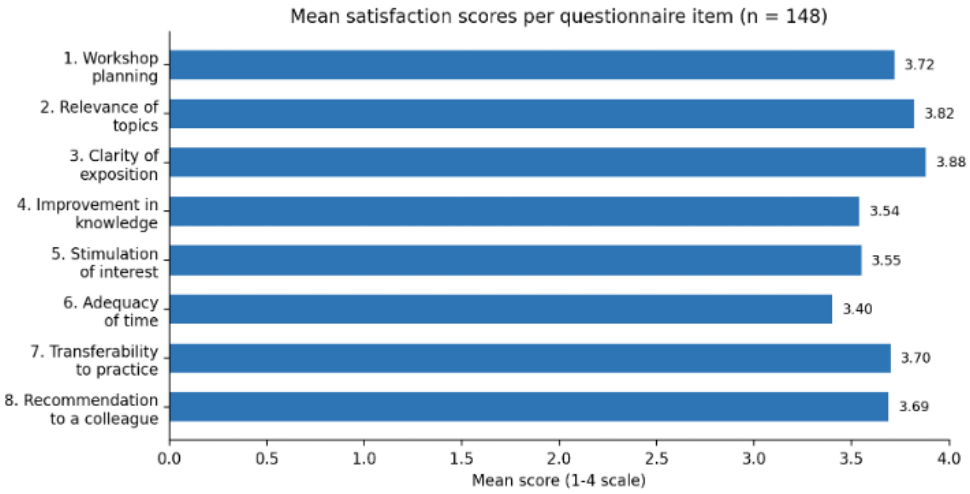


Figure 2: Mean satisfaction scores per ex-post questionnaire item (n = 148, 1–4 scale).

The lowest-rated item concerned the adequacy of time allocated to the different activities (M = 3.40), with 16.2% of respondents expressing partial or full disagreement. This finding is consistent with the open-ended responses: among the aspects respondents found least satisfactory, time-related constraints were the most frequently mentioned theme (cited by 26 of 148 respondents, 17.6%), followed by the limited opportunity for live interaction and question-and-answer exchanges during sessions (23 respondents, 15.5%). Conversely, 46 respondents (31.1%) explicitly stated that they had no negative remarks ("nessuno"), underlining an overall positive evaluation of the training experience.

When asked to define the workshop with a single adjective, participants overwhelmingly used positive terms: "utile" (useful) was the most frequent response (42 occurrences), followed by "esaustivo" (comprehensive, 11), "interessante" (interesting, 9), "formativo" (formative, 8), and "necessario" (necessary, 7), among others. This pattern of responses is consistent with the high scores obtained on item 7 (M = 3.70; 74.3% of respondents fully agreed that they intended to introduce the methods presented into their own teaching) and item 8 (M = 3.69; 72.3% fully agreed they would recommend the workshop to a

colleague), suggesting that the training was perceived not only as informative but also as directly actionable and worth disseminating among peers.

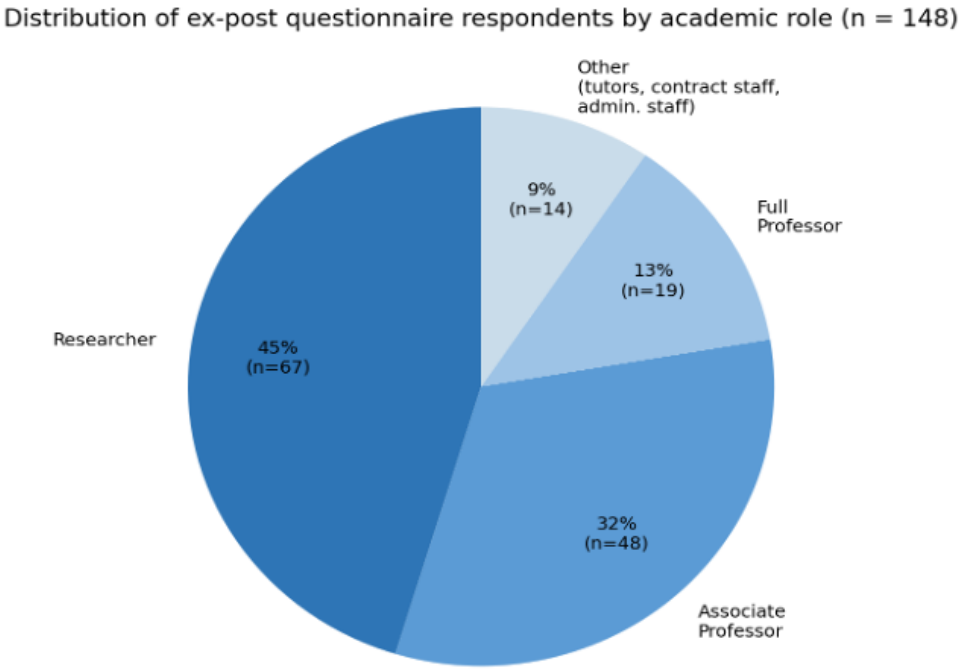


Figure 3: Distribution of ex-post questionnaire respondents by academic role (n = 148).

The role distribution of respondents (Figure 3) — predominantly Researchers and Associate Professors — mirrors the composition of the wider population of tenured staff engaged by the programme (cf. Table 1) and supports the representativeness of the survey sample with respect to the overall teaching body involved in the Faculty Development initiative.

These results are consistent with the theoretical framework outlined in Sections 2 and 3: clarity of exposition and relevance of content emerged as the strongest predictors of teachers' positive engagement, reinforcing the centrality of teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000) not only in the synchronous teaching delivered to students but also in the Faculty Development experience itself. At the same time, the recurring request for more interactive time and opportunities for dialogue echoes the pedagogical principles the programme itself sought to instil — namely, that synchronous environments are most effective when they prioritise dialogue

and co-construction of knowledge over one-way transmission (Rapanta et al., 2020; Themelis, 2022). This apparent tension suggests that future editions of the Faculty Development programme should more deliberately model, within the training sessions themselves, the same interactive and dialogic format that teachers are subsequently expected to implement with their students.

8. Conclusions and Research Perspectives

This study starts from the idea that teachers' professional competence for synchronous, interaction-centred online teaching cannot be assumed but must be intentionally designed, cultivated, and evaluated through structured Faculty Development. The case of Pegaso University's CETAL initiative illustrates how a large-scale training programme, addressed to 395 tenured faculty members, 70 adjunct lecturers, and 52 university tutors, can be implemented and monitored at institutional scale, achieving a completion rate of approximately 80% on the core training pathway and consistently positive evaluations from participants.

The findings show that teachers and tutors recognised the relevance and clarity of the training and expressed a clear intention to transfer the proposed methods into their own teaching practice, while also signalling the need for more time and greater interactivity within the training sessions themselves. These results support the view that pedagogical proximity — understood as the intentional design of relational, affective, and interactive learning environments (Themelis, 2022; Aires, 2025) — must be cultivated first within the Faculty Development experience before it can be reliably enacted in teachers' own synchronous classrooms.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The ex-post questionnaire captured only short-term, self-reported perceptions immediately following training, without a baseline measure of teachers' initial expectations or a longitudinal follow-up of classroom implementation. The response rate, while substantial, did not cover the entire population of trained staff, and the residual group of teachers who had not yet completed the training (n = 76 for the Didactic Model; n = 53 for the Assessment Model) was not represented in the evaluation sample.

Future research should therefore integrate the monitoring data presented here with classroom-level indicators of synchronous engagement — such as the simultaneous active participants and daily student–teacher interactions documented by the University's IT division — and with longitudinal measures of

teaching practice change and student outcomes. Extending the evaluation to adjunct lecturers and tutors, and complementing self-reported data with observational evidence from live sessions, would further strengthen the evidence base for understanding how Faculty Development can be intentionally designed to scale pedagogical proximity across a fully online university.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the conception and development of this work and approved the final version of the manuscript. In particular, XXXX was responsible for the Introduction and the Conclusions; XXXX authored Sections 2 and 3 in their entirety; XXXX authored Sections 4, 5, 6, and 7 in their entirety and carried out the linguistic revision of the manuscript.

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