Essentials of Curriculum in the Perspective of Emerging Trends and Needs of Distant Learners

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Abstract

The curriculum resembles a complex framework whose constant development supports teaching, learning, and achievement. Nations regularly modify their curricula to meet the needs of children, an ever-changing global environment, and the standards for what students must know and be able to achieve good results. This study analyzed and highlighted critical curriculum components from the perspective of emerging trends in distance education and their needs. The researchers used content analysis to examine empirical documentation. Research articles from seven distance education journals were reviewed for this study. A framework for content analysis was developed through an extensive literature review to analyze the essentials of curriculum from the perspective of emerging trends and the needs of distant learners. Data was collected using the criteria determined and the content analysis framework. Themes helped researchers analyze the data. The frequency of the evidence found was determined. The researchers found that distance education should be outcome-based, competency-based, skill-based, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and technology-based, with a focus on the capacity building of learners. Essentials of curriculum and trends may vary with context. However, a curriculum should satisfy all the learning needs of the learners.

Keywords: Curriculum, Distant Learner, Essentials of Curriculum, Global Environment, Needs.

Introduction

The curriculum is similar to a complex framework in which development is an ongoing process that supports teaching, learning, and achievement (Barrow, 2015). To produce good results, nations constantly adapt curricula to meet the demands of an ever-changing world, the needs of children, and the requirements for what students need to learn and do. Like many other countries, Pakistan needs help to provide a high-quality education system that equips pupils for the needs of a quickly changing global environment. The creation of curricula and their evaluation are essential to this process because they ensure that educational programs are relevant, effective, and meet the needs of students and society. Introducing new policies, initiatives, and reforms aimed at enhancing the quality and relevance of education is just one of the essential changes that Pakistan's

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education system has seen in recent years (Olibie, 2013). There has been an increase in interest in new curriculum development and evaluation trends as educators seek to keep up with the latest research and best practices in these areas. In other words, the curriculum should meet the demands of specific emerging problems. With the introduction of new ideas and the development of technology, the curriculum is evolving even more to suit the needs and realities of today. From the perspective of distance education trends and needs, this study analyzed and highlighted curriculum essentials.

Distance education was developed based on the idea that learning may occur without student-teacher face-to-face interaction. Distance learning is widespread today thanks to improvements in communications technology, computer connectivity, and the Internet (Beldarrain, 2006). In Pakistan, distance learning is still quite significant for education. Online education is no longer just a trend. It has substantially impacted higher education globally and the landscape of distance learning. Making knowledge available to more people than just a select few has been a goal of distance education since its inception. Distance education makes education affordable for people who cannot afford the expense or cannot sit in a traditional classroom. The time has come to emphasize the quality of the education we offer in distance education and make the most of modern advances and technology to teach and inspire the learners of the twenty-first century (Simonson et al., 2019).

Students who receive instruction through the distance learning system are referred to as distant learners. Most adult learners prefer to continue working and studying while taking care of their families; these learners require an adaptable and easily accessible educational model that is only available through a remote education system. Students who study remotely are organized into groups according to specific criteria. For example, students who live in a different time zone or speak a foreign language may be geographically far from their educational institutions and be separated in terms of time. Many people work full-time jobs and must take care of their families. Most advanced learners may require additional assistance in their studies because they last studied a while ago. Teaching in the distance education system is more complex than in the traditional educational system. In the current era of science and technology, instructors should refrain from cutting down trees to create print-based resources for readers. Doing so is costly, and there is a greater chance of misunderstanding when using asynchronous media. Conversely, modern technology and the Internet can be used at a lower cost, and there is less possibility of miscommunication when communicating synchronously. In light of this, most new developments in distant learning are planned as emerging trends using software and network technologies (Arshad et al., 2017).

The present study provided essentials of curriculum and emergent curriculum trends and needs in distance education. The curriculum layout acknowledges the need to include teaching-learning results for an education scheme. It helped to make the required changes to the teaching-learning process and the community with appropriate feedback. This study highlighted emerging trends, global developments, and distance education needs that will give rise to various curriculum reforms.

The primary goal underlying a wholesome higher education is the transformation of personnel into committed professionals, successful leaders, and enlightened human beings. The curriculum is the only tool for restructuring education to achieve its objectives. Curriculum development is a continuous process, ensuring faster assimilation of new ideas and concepts stressed by the evolving demands of society and the vastness of knowledge. As a large number of students are taking courses online through technologically mediated distance education, it is critical to understand

their needs and create a curriculum that reflects educational principles, incorporates elements of engagement and pedagogy, and complies with institutional and industry requirements (Gouëdard et al., 2020).

The term 'curriculum' has many meanings. It is described as a "course of study" in the Concise Oxford Dictionary and states that it derives from the Latin word for a chariot race course. The curriculum is critically important to the professional instructor (Print, 1993). Smith (2000) defines the curriculum as what occurs in the classroom, including data transmission, attempts to achieve specific objectives, student interaction process, teachers' awareness, and classroom actions. It is described by Richards (2018) as the "reconstruction of knowledge and experience that allows the learner to develop in the practice of intellectual control of subsequent knowledge and experience." Curriculum means expected teaching experiences intended to help learners improve individual skills and broaden them. In its Glossary of Education Terms, the International Bureau of Education defines 'curriculum' as a summary of what, why, and how well students can learn systematically and deliberately. The curriculum is not an end but rather a way of facilitating quality learning (IBE Glossary of Curriculum Terminology, 2013). In essence, "curriculum" is a continuum that includes what is prescribed, taught, experienced, and evaluated. However, there are several gaps in certain instances at and between each continuum stage. Consequently, what is prescribed is not taught, and what is taught cannot be remembered, and only a 'pale shadow' of what was meant is what is measured (Marope et al., 2017).

Baruch (2022) observed that the world is now a society of knowledge and that more occupations need people to be professional and experienced employees. Those abilities include:

- Critical thinking and problem-solving
- Collaboration across networks and leadership
- Agility as well as adaptability
- Entrepreneurialism and initiative
- Efficient oral and written communication skills
- Accessing and reviewing data

In light of changing trends in curriculum, teaching, and learning, the role of teachers in promoting education is evident. The consequences and problems to be discussed by teachers in education and pedagogy have gained particular urgency in a time of significant change. Curriculum development is a coherent mechanism for making programmatic decisions and revising the outcome based on ongoing and subsequent assessments (Boyle & Charles, 2016). In curriculum development, Alsubaie (2016) proposed four measures. They were as follows:

- Stating educational objectives
- Selecting educational activities to achieve the goals.
- Organizing experiences for learning
- Evaluation (the method of deciding whether the goals are achieved)

Feldman (2010) has also proposed some curriculum planning measures that include surveying the scene, evaluating the needs, recognizing and defining the problem, recalling goals and objectives, making plans, preparing designs, coordinating the workforce, managing the planning process, using planning items, and applying means of evaluation. According to Viriansky (2015) the curriculum development method can be divided into five primary stages: need analysis, the planning stage, content development, pilot testing and revision, and the complete curriculum design.

Irajpour et al. (2015) refer to the situation analysis process as "a situation consisting of several factors such as the home and background of pupils, school, their environment, their employees,

facilities, and equipment." Examination of these variables, along with self-analysis, accompanied by an analysis of their consequences for curriculum preparation, is one step towards a logical approach. The need for situational analysis is a fundamental principle for successfully implementing the curriculum.

Table 1: Curriculum Development Process

Step-1	Step-2	Step-3	Step-4
Identifying and selecting competencies	Developing learning standards	Defining benchmarks at developmental levels	Developing student learning outcomes at each grade level

Note: The source of the table is National Curriculum Framework Pakistan (2006).

The above table outlines a four-step process related to education, likely aimed at curriculum development and educational planning. The first step involves identifying and selecting the core competencies or skills that students should acquire through the educational program. This step is foundational and sets the stage for curriculum development. Once the competencies are identified, the next step is to create learning standards. Learning standards specify what students should know and be able to do at the end of a particular educational level or grade. They serve as the framework for designing the curriculum. In this step, the process involves defining benchmarks or milestones at various developmental levels. These benchmarks help break down the learning standards into manageable components that can be assessed and monitored as students' progress. The final step focuses on developing specific learning outcomes for each grade level. These outcomes describe what students are expected to achieve by the end of a given academic year. They serve as a guide for teachers and students, providing clarity on educational goals. Overall, this four-step process represents a systematic approach to curriculum development and educational planning, ensuring that competencies are identified, translated into standards, broken down into benchmarks, and transformed into specific learning outcomes for students at different grade levels. It promotes clarity and alignment in the educational system.

Teachers should train learners to be able to act as mature contributing members by being knowledgeable and able to perform in order to meet the needs of society. Teachers can integrate experiential learning to help students combine their new knowledge with established knowledge (constructivism) and track their learning and problems (Knott et al., 2013). The rapid change in what we know about the world makes it more important to learn in life (Aspin et al., 2012). Therefore, it is another curriculum challenge for teachers to build lifelong learners prepared for the natural world and the future. One of the teachers' most daunting tasks is preparing children to become productive. As per the outline approved by the National Curriculum Council, the National Curriculum Framework has to address the following concerns:

- Ideological concerns
- Academic concerns
- Socio-cultural concerns
- Evaluation
- Emerging trends

The identified research gap pertained to the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how to design curriculum content, assessment methods, and instructional strategies that cater to the needs of a diverse student population in the context of distance learning. The study explored various learning styles, needs, and preferences among diverse student groups engaged in distance

education. Investigating how curriculum content can be made relevant to enhance the accessibility and engagement of learners with diverse learning needs in distance education was very crucial.
The theoretical background that is often relevant to the design of curriculum for distance education is:

Constructivism: This theory emphasizes that learning is an active, social process where learners construct knowledge through interactions with their environment. This theory is often applied in distance education through collaborative and interactive online activities.

Connectivism: This learning theory focuses on the idea that learning occurs through connections and networks. It is especially relevant in distance education, as online learners rely on human and technological networks to acquire knowledge.

Andragogy: This theory, often associated with adult learning, emphasizes self-directed learning and problem-solving. It is essential in distance education, as many adult learners seek flexibility and the ability to direct their learning.

Experiential Learning: This theory posits that individuals learn from their experiences and reflect on those experiences. Distance education can leverage experiential learning through real-world assignments and case studies.

Community of Inquiry (CoI): is a framework for understanding the educational experience, focusing on social, cognitive, and teaching presence. It is often used to design and assess online courses, promoting a sense of community and critical thinking.

Cognitive Load Theory: This theory is concerned with the mental effort required for learning. Designing materials and activities that minimize cognitive load in distance education is essential for effective learning.

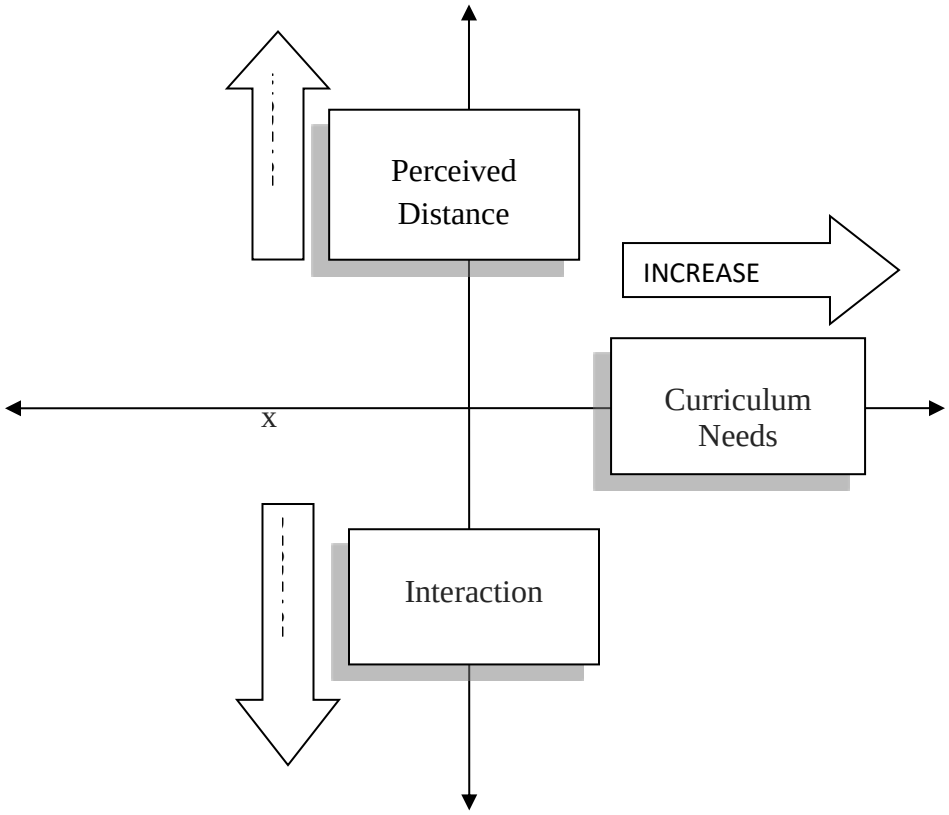
Bloom's Taxonomy: This taxonomy classifies learning objectives into cognitive levels, ranging from lower-order thinking (remembering, understanding) to higher-order thinking (analyzing, creating). It helps in designing a curriculum that addresses different levels of learning.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): is a framework for designing curriculum and educational environments that are accessible and effective for all students, including those with disabilities.

Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK): emphasizes the intersection of technology, pedagogy, and content knowledge. It is crucial for designing technology-enhanced curricula in distance education.

These theoretical foundations give concepts for discussing the essentials of the curriculum in the context of emerging trends and the needs of distant learners.

Figure 1: Phrases related to Distance Education



Source*:* Self-constructed on the basis of theoretical framework.

The above figure shows some phrases related to DE, as the increased curriculum needs suggest a growing demand for curriculum development or adaptation. In the context of distance education, it may signify the need to create or modify educational content to meet the evolving requirements of learners, institutions, or industries. It could reflect the changing educational landscape, emerging trends, or the need for more specialized curricula. An increase in the perceived distance indicates an increase in the perception of distance or separation. Distance education can relate to learners perceiving a more significant physical or psychological gap between themselves and the educational resources, instructors, or peers. This perception of increased distance may result from the use of technology, a lack of face-to-face interaction, or other factors. A decrease in interaction highlights a reduction in interaction within the educational context. Interaction is a fundamental component of effective learning. A decrease in interaction could signify challenges in maintaining meaningful communication and engagement among learners, instructors, or within the learning community. This may result from the physical or perceived distance mentioned in the previous phrase. The figure illustrates a trend or phenomenon in education, particularly in distance education, where there is a growing need for curriculum adaptation. This can lead to an increased perception of distance among learners, potentially resulting in decreased interaction.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The researchers used content analysis to examine empirical documentation for the study's objectives. According to Drisko and Maschi (2016) content analysis is a methodical, repeatable process for condensing a large amount of text into smaller content categories. According to Stemler (2015) content analysis is a technique for analyzing written, vocal, or visual communication messages using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The researchers found different themes using content analysis, and the frequencies against those themes were calculated.

Sample of the Study

The following seven journals were examined for this study: Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance, and e-Learning (OL), The American Journal of Distance Education (AJDE), Distance Education (DE), European Journal of Open Distance and e-Learning (EURODL), Journal of Distance Education (JDE), Journal of Online Learning and Technology (JOLT), and The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning (IRRODL). The journals were chosen based on a preliminary evaluation of journals in DE and educational technology. The journals that were chosen for review met the following requirements:

1. Publications of articles in English
2. Refereed journals that are indexed by well-known databases
3. Publication histories of the last two years

For this study, only the research articles were used. After choosing the journals, all publications published between 2019 and 2022 were carefully examined.

Methods of the Study

A framework for content analysis was developed through an extensive literature review to analyze the essentials of curriculum from the perspective of emerging trends and the needs of distant learners. The framework is comprised of three parts. The first one comprises Sr. No., emerging trends, and evidence found. The second comprised Sr. No., distant learner needs, and evidence found. The third one comprises Sr. No., DE curriculum essentials, and evidence found. There is much precedence in the literature that previous researchers used a content analysis framework to examine empirical documentation. Six experts validated the content analysis framework. Its S-CVI, which was 0.92, was computed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected using the content analysis framework. Themes helped researchers analyze the data. The frequency of the evidence found was determined using a keyword density checker. Only data relevant to curriculum trends and distant learners' needs was selected from the seven above journals published between 2019 and 2022.

Results

The data was analyzed according to the nature of the study. Frequencies of evidence found were determined using a keyword density checker regarding emerging trends in distance education, distance learner needs, and DE curriculum essentials.

Table 2: Emerging Trends in Distance Education

Sr.	Themes	Frequency of Evidences Found
1.	Outcome-based education (OBE)	39
2.	Competency-based education (CBE)	46
3.	Skill-based education (SBE)	51
4.	Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programs	35
5.	Industry-academia collaboration	44
6.	Technology-based learning	56
7.	Capacity building	60

Table 2 depicts different themes regarding emerging trends in DE and the frequency of evidence found regarding them. The researchers found 39 evidences for outcome-based education, 46 evidences for competency-based education, 51 evidences for skill-based education, 35 for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programmes, 44 for industry-academia collaboration, 56 for technology-based learning, and 60 for capacity building.

Table 3: Learner Needs in Distance Education

Sr.	Themes	Frequency of Evidences Found
1.	Self-regulation	20
2.	Time awareness	22
3.	Convenience	35
4.	Multitasking	18
5.	Engaging and Seeking Interaction	28
6.	Environment Management	34
7.	Independence/Motivation	40
8.	Self-Advocacy	35
9.	Openness	50
10.	Learner-centered	52
11.	Learner Support	56
12.	Possibility of delayed viewing/replay	38
13.	Cost effective	60
14.	Quality	45
15.	Increasing curriculum sources	39
16.	Inclusive learning plan	25

Table 3 presents different themes regarding learner needs in distance education and frequency of evidences found. Self-regulation was evidenced 20 times in different journals, time awareness 22 times, convenience 35, multitasking 18, engaging and seeking interaction 28, environment management 34, independence/motivation 40 times, self-advocacy 35, openness 50, learner-centered 52, learner support 56, possibility of delayed viewing/replay 38, cost effective 60 times, quality 45, increasing curriculum sources 39 and inclusive learning plan was found 25 times.

The extension of the research can be investigating the emergent trends of assessment and evaluation in distance education.

Table 4: Essentials of Curriculum in Distance Education

Sr.	Themes	Frequency of Evidences Found
1.	Learning objectives	52
2.	Subject matter	49
3.	Learning experiences	41
4.	Promising syllabus	31
5.	Graphic organizations in syllabi	19
6.	Synchronous components	50
7.	Asynchronous components	46
8.	Hybrid components	36
9.	Effective Learning platform	54
10.	Different instructional formats	29
11.	Learning activities	37
12.	Self-evaluation exercises	30
13.	Assignments	45
14.	Open Book Exams	17
15.	End semester exams	49
16.	Practical training	30
17.	Tools that are mobile-friendly and/or can be used offline	33
18.	Projects	56
19.	Technology	56
20	Blended learning	43
21	Workshops	27

The above table shows the essentials of the curriculum in DE and the number of their evidence. The researchers found learning objectives 52 times, subject matter 49 times, learning experiences 41 times, promising syllabus 31 times, graphic organizations in syllabi 19 times, synchronous components 50 times, asynchronous components 46 times, hybrid components 36 times, effective learning platform 54 times, different instructional formats 29 times, learning activities 37 times, self-evaluation exercises 30 times, assignments 45, open book exams 17, end semester exams 49 times, practical training 30 times, tools that are mobile-friendly and can be used offline 33, projects 56 times, technology 56, blended learning 43 times, and workshops 27 times.

Discussion

Pakistan's education system has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly in curriculum development. This study provides the viewpoint of researchers on emerging trends, distant learner needs, and curriculum essentials. The findings of the study revealed that emerging trends in distance education were outcome-based education (OBE), competency-based education (CBE), skill-based education (SBE), interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programs, collaboration, technology-based learning, and capacity building. The findings aligned with Khadim et al. (2023) findings. Bozkurt et al. (2015) studied trends in distance education and learner needs. They focused on macro-, meso-, and micro-level trends in DE—distance education systems and theories at the macro level. The meso level included management, organization, and technology. Microlevel teaching and learning in distance education The research findings

regarding learner needs in distance education were self-regulation, time awareness, convenience, multitasking, engaging and seeking interaction, environment management, independence and motivation, self-advocacy, openness, learner-centeredness, learner support, the possibility of delayed viewing or replay, cost-effectiveness, quality, increasing curriculum sources, and an inclusive learning plan. Key areas of study include educational technology, interaction, learner characteristics, and instructional design. Researchers employ various theoretical frameworks. The study suggests using mixed research methods and expanding research into K–12 settings to meet evolving educational needs.

Sampson (2003) conducted a study to determine the needs of distance learners. He found course materials, module choice, assignment feedback, assignment completion time, and student support. O'Regan (2020) conducted a study regarding distance learner needs and found the richness of face-to-face interaction, self-generated peer networks, document-based guidelines, web-based information, and online doctoral information and support. The findings regarding the essentials of the curriculum in DE were learning objectives, subject matter, learning experiences, a promising syllabus, graphic organizations in syllabi, synchronous components, asynchronous components, hybrid components, an effective learning platform, different instructional formats, learning activities, self-evaluation exercises, assignments, open book exams, end-of-semester exams, practical training, tools that are mobile-friendly and can be used offline, projects, technology, blended learning, and workshops.

Chugh et al. (2017) also studied curriculum design for distance education in the tertiary sector. The paper underscores the importance of designing a curriculum for distance education to meet global enrollment trends. It advocates for alignment with educational principles, engagement, and institutional and industry requirements. It introduces an educator's role as a conductor, technician, and choreographer in curriculum design. The paper proposes a triad of pedagogy, technology, and engaged learners as keys to contemporary curriculum design for distance education. Bozkurt and Zawacki (2021) study on trends and patterns in distance education (2014–2019) analyses DE research from 2014 to 2019, identifying three primary focus areas: openness and open education, learning design and support services, and the application of educational technology. The research predominantly centers on higher education. The study recommends that DE researchers expand their focus to K -12 education, non-formal settings, and digital media learning. It highlights the increased relevance of online learning and teaching in the COVID-19 era and the need to build on existing theories and practical experiences. DE research is grounded in foundational theories, such as adult learning and self-directed learning, and has generated new theories while borrowing from related fields. The study emphasizes that DE has historically addressed inequities and knowledge gaps but is facing significant transformation due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changing learning ecosystems. It calls for a proactive research agenda to respond to evolving educational needs and challenges.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A carefully designed curriculum goes a long way toward meeting the needs of learners and the demands of the workplace and educators alike. This paper reviewed the existing curriculum design literature emphasizing distant learning to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of this field. The article will be a valuable resource for strategies educators can utilize to launch and enhance curriculum development for distance learning. Emerging trends in distance education were outcome-based education (OBE), competency-based education (CBE), skill-based education (SBE), interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programs, industry-academia collaboration,

technology-based learning, and capacity building. Secondly, learner needs in distance education were self-regulation, time awareness, convenience, multitasking, engaging and seeking interaction, environment management, independence and motivation, self-advocacy, openness, learner-centeredness, learner support, the possibility of delayed viewing or replay, cost-effectiveness, quality, increasing curriculum sources, and an inclusive learning plan. Essentials of the curriculum in DE were learning objectives, subject matter, learning experiences, a promising syllabus, graphic organizations in syllabi, synchronous components, asynchronous components, hybrid components, an effective learning platform, different instructional formats**,** learning activities, self-evaluation exercises, assignments, open book exams, end-of-semester exams, practical training, tools that are mobile-friendly and can be used offline, projects, technology, blended learning, and workshops. The curriculum for distant learners needs to be flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of this audience. This includes options for asynchronous learning, allowing students to study at their own pace while balancing other commitments.

Emerging trends often involve new technologies. The curriculum integrates new technologies to enhance the learning experience. This includes interactive online platforms, video conferencing, and AI-powered tools for personalization. Emerging trends and needs may involve industry-specific skills. Distant learners may come from various cultural backgrounds. Designing a curriculum that respects and acknowledges these differences is essential to creating an inclusive learning environment. Given the dynamic nature of education and technology, curriculum design needs to allow for regular monitoring and updates to stay aligned with emerging trends and the evolving needs of distant learners.

To sum up, designing a curriculum for distant learners in the context of emerging trends and needs is multifaceted. It requires a balance between technology, pedagogy, and an understanding of the specific needs of the learner population. The curriculum needs to be learner-centric, flexible, and adaptable to changes in technology and education trends.

The following are some recommendations:

The curriculum must be flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of distant learners. It should allow for personalization, enabling students to choose the learning path that suits them best. This might involve asynchronous and synchronous learning, self-paced modules, and real-time interactions.

- Distant learners must develop solid digital literacy skills. The curriculum should include opportunities for learners to become proficient in using various digital tools, platforms, and resources. This will empower them to navigate the online learning environment effectively.
- The curriculum should incorporate various learning materials, including video lectures, podcasts, interactive simulations, and online discussions. This accommodates different learning styles and preferences and keeps learners engaged.
- Distant learners should have opportunities for collaboration and peer interaction. Virtual group projects, discussion boards, and social learning platforms can be essential components of the curriculum to foster peer-to-peer learning and community building.
- Frequent and diverse assessment methods are critical. These assessments should focus on testing knowledge and evaluating skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and application of knowledge in real-world contexts.
- The curriculum must be designed with inclusivity, ensuring learners of all backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles can access and benefit from the content. This may involve using accessible technologies and providing multiple means of representation.

- Teachers and instructors need ongoing training to deliver online education effectively. They should be knowledgeable about the latest tools and best practices for online instruction and be able to support students in digital environments.
- Distant learning platforms can collect vast amounts of data. This data should be analyzed to identify areas where the curriculum can be improved and to provide personalized recommendations to learners.
- The curriculum should integrate emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual and augmented reality, to enhance the learning experience and provide exposure to cutting-edge tools and methods.
- The curriculum should align with the real-world needs of distant learners. This might involve a stronger emphasis on skills in high demand in the job market, helping learners transition to or advance in their careers.
- In DE, instructional immediacy must be used to keep distant learners motivated.
  The extension of the research can investigate the emergent trends of assessment and evaluation in distance education.

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