The Role of Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes in Developing School Leavers through Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE)

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ABSTRACT

Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) has created wider access to higher education for school leavers who begin at an early stage. Within this setting, programmes offered by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FSSH) provide structured academic exposure that supports both personal growth and workplace development. This study examines how selected FSSH programmes contribute to the development of school leavers enrolled through ODDE. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through document analysis involving programme curricula, course outlines, learning outcomes, and assessment structures within English languages and Counselling programmes. The findings indicate that the integration of theoretical grounding, applied learning tasks, and reflective components supports the development of critical thinking, interpersonal communication, self-regulation, and ethical awareness relevant to workplace contexts. Programme documents further reflect intentional alignment between academic content and real-life social challenges encountered by school leavers. Flexible ODDE learning structures and assessment designs support sustained participation alongside employment commitments. The study highlights the role of FSSH programmes as a developmental platform that connects academic learning with practical competency formation. Overall, the findings suggest that Social Sciences and Humanities education delivered through ODDE offers a viable pathway for nurturing work-ready competencies and supporting early career development among school leavers.

Keywords:
Competency-development, Document-analysis, ODDE, Social Sciences and Humanities, School-leavers

Introduction

Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) has become an important pathway for many school leavers seeking access to higher education while managing the realities of early adulthood, employment responsibilities, and financial pressures. In contemporary higher education, ODDE is no longer viewed simply as an alternative mode of study, but as a flexible learning environment that enables learners from different backgrounds to continue their education in ways that fit their personal and professional circumstances (Bond et al., 2020; Nkomo et al., 2021). For school leavers in particular, flexible learning opportunities are increasingly significant as many begin working early, support their families, or navigate uncertain career pathways while pursuing further education. At the same time, expectations surrounding higher education have expanded beyond the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge alone.

Universities are now expected to support learners in developing broader competencies such as critical thinking, communication skills, adaptability, ethical awareness, self-regulation, and reflective thinking, all of which are considered essential for meaningful participation in contemporary workplaces and society (Pellaud et al., 2021). These competencies are especially important within ODDE settings, where learners often study independently and must balance academic demands alongside employment and personal responsibilities (MacCann et al., 2020). Within this context, Social Sciences and Humanities education plays a particularly important role because these fields engage directly with human behaviour, communication, ethics, social understanding, and personal development.

Although previous studies have explored student engagement, online learning experiences, and technology use within ODDE environments (Bond et al., 2020; Bergdahl, 2022c; Nkomo et al., 2021), less attention has been given to how

Social Sciences and Humanities programmes themselves are designed to support school leavers through competency-oriented curriculum structures and assessment practices. In particular, there remains limited understanding of how programme learning outcomes, course structures, and assessment designs intentionally reflect the developmental needs of school leavers who pursue higher education through flexible learning pathways. This gap is important because programme documents provide formal insight into how institutions conceptualise learner development and academic priorities within ODDE environments. Documents such as programme learning outcomes, curriculum structures, course outlines, and assessment descriptions reflect the competencies, values, and forms of learning that institutions aim to emphasise through their programmes. Rather than measuring actual learner outcomes, document analysis allows researchers to examine how competency development, workplace relevance, learner autonomy, and reflective learning are intentionally embedded within programme design and curriculum structures (Bowen, 2009). As such, document analysis offers an appropriate approach for understanding how Social Sciences and Humanities programmes are positioned to support school leavers within ODDE contexts. The relevance of this discussion is further strengthened by longstanding concerns regarding the applicability of Social Sciences knowledge within different social and cultural realities.

Alatas (2001) argues that Social Sciences education becomes less meaningful when theories and concepts are detached from lived experiences and local realities. For school leavers within ODDE environments, this issue is especially significant because meaningful learning depends not only on acquiring academic knowledge but also on the ability to connect learning with workplace experiences, social interaction, and personal growth. In this sense, Social Sciences and Humanities programmes may serve as important developmental spaces where learners are encouraged to reflect critically, communicate effectively, understand social realities, and develop competencies that are transferable across academic, professional, and everyday contexts. Against this background, the present study examines how selected Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through ODDE position competency development, contextual relevance, and learner-oriented curriculum structures for school leavers. Through qualitative document analysis of counselling and English language programmes, the study explores how programme learning outcomes, curriculum structures, and assessment designs reflect broader developmental intentions associated with cross-disciplinary competencies and contemporary learner needs within flexible higher education environments.

Literature Review

The literature review explores how Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE), learner engagement, and Social Sciences and Humanities education intersect in supporting the development of school leavers within contemporary higher education environments. Existing scholarship highlights that ODDE is not only a flexible mode of learning delivery, but also a learning environment that shapes how learners participate, manage responsibilities, and develop competencies relevant to academic, social, and workplace contexts (Bond et al., 2020; Bergdahl, 2022c). Within this setting, Social Sciences and Humanities programmes are increasingly recognised for their role in supporting reflective thinking, communication, ethical awareness, adaptability, and interpersonal understanding, particularly among learners balancing study alongside employment and personal commitments (Pellaud et al., 2021). The literature reviewed in this study therefore focuses on three interconnected areas: ODDE as a learning environment for school leavers, the relevance of Social Sciences and Humanities education in applied and contextual settings, and the development of cross-disciplinary competencies associated with 21st century learning and workplace expectations.

Early ODDE as a Learning Environment for School Leavers

ODDE is increasingly positioned as a practical entry point into higher education for school leavers, yet its effectiveness depends heavily on how well the learning environment sustains student engagement. Engagement matters because low engagement can disrupt cognitive growth and weaken learning outcomes (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2015), and it is closely linked to withdrawal and dropout across secondary and tertiary levels (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Interest in engagement has grown, even as the concept still attracts debate due to its broad and sometimes unclear definitions (Aparicio, Iturralde, & Maseda, 2021; Trowler, Allan, Bryk, & Din, 2021). Within ODDE, questions around how engagement should be understood and measured have become more prominent, given that digital learning contexts differ from on-campus learning in interaction patterns, learning design, and visibility of learner participation (Bergdahl, 2020; Bond, 2020b; Henrie, Halverson, & Graham, 2015). Research suggests educational technologies can support learner agency through stronger self-regulation and self-efficacy (Alioon & Delialioğlu, 2019), higher participation

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(Northey, Bucic, Chylinski, & Govind, 2015), and broader involvement in learning communities (Junco, 2012). Even so, scholarship in educational technology has been criticised for limited theoretical anchoring, which affects how engagement evidence is interpreted and applied (Bergdahl, Nouri, Karunaratne, Afzaal, & Saqr, 2020; Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter, & Kerres, 2020; Hew, Lan, Tang, Jia, & Lo, 2019). This signals a need to examine ODDE engagement through frameworks that link digital environments to learning activities and relationships, especially teacher–student interactions and pedagogical design choices (Bergdahl, 2022a, 2022b; Bergdahl & Bond, 2021).

A consistent view in the literature is that engagement is multidimensional and shaped by behavioural, cognitive, and affective processes (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kahu, 2013). Technology-oriented perspectives reinforce this by framing engagement as active and collaborative learning grounded in authentic tasks (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). Online engagement is also frequently discussed through community-oriented lenses: The Community of Inquiry highlights teaching, social, and cognitive presence as pillars of a productive learning experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), while community theory stresses participation, belonging, and trust among learners and teachers (Rovai, Wighting, & Lucking, 2004; Wenger, 2008). Motivation is linked to engagement but does not fully explain it; students may still engage without waiting for motivation, and teaching may influence engagement directly through learning design rather than only via motivational strategies (Bergdahl, 2022c, d; Reeve, 2012).

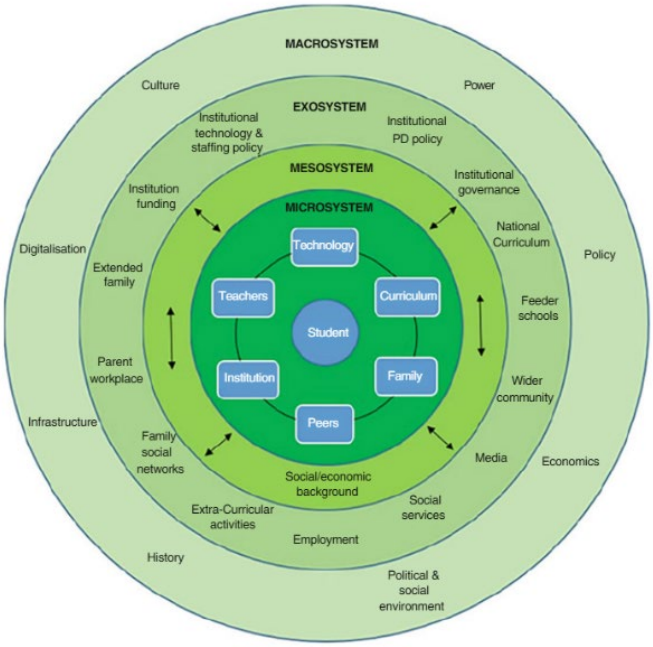
For ODDE school leavers, engagement is best viewed as socially situated and shaped by context. A bioecological view positions the learner within nested systems where engagement is affected by family background, socioeconomic conditions, and access to devices and connectivity (Bond, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These factors can constrain participation by limiting access to suitable technology or stable internet, reinforcing the persistence of digital divides even in affluent settings (Bond, Bedenlier, et al., 2021; Bond et al., 2021; Warschauer & Xu, 2018). At the immediate learning setting, engagement is influenced by teacher and peer interactions, meaningful tasks, and learners' psychosocial resources such as self-efficacy, well-being, and self-regulation (Bandura, 1995; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Willis, Povey, Hodges, & Carroll, 2018; Zepke, 2014). These influences are also connected to adult and school-leaver readiness to study online, including prior experiences with technology and acceptance of digital learning (Moos & Azevedo, 2009). Mode of delivery also matters. ODDE designs with largely asynchronous components tend to privilege cognitive engagement, whereas synchronous-heavy approaches lean more on social engagement, creating different challenges for teachers in choosing what supports learning best rather than what is easiest within a given mode (Bergdahl & Gyllander Torkildsen, 2022). Since disengagement can develop into longer-term withdrawal and dropout (Tomaszewska-Pękała, Marchlik, & Wrona, 2020), ODDE environments for school leavers need strategies that detect disengagement early, including attention to participation patterns and delays in initiating tasks in learning platforms (Saqr et al., 2019).

Work on microlevel engagement suggests engagement quality can fluctuate within online lessons, with reduced immediacy, divided attention, and shallow processing signalling declining engagement even when students remain logged in (Bergdahl, 2022c). This also reinforces that disengagement is not simply "low engagement," but a distinct construct with its own indicators (Wang, Fredricks, Ye, Hofkens, & Linn, 2017). A growing argument is that ODDE engagement research should treat social engagement as a core dimension, not an optional add-on, since online learning success often hinges on interaction, shared knowledge building, and support-seeking behaviours (Bergdahl, 2020; Bergdahl, 2022c; Bond et al., 2021). Evidence during COVID-19 also strengthened the case that social connection is central to sustaining learning participation, especially when learners experience isolation or low perceived care (Bond et al., 2021). Measuring only one or two engagement dimensions can give an incomplete picture, limiting understanding of why school leavers persist or exit ODDE pathways (Nkomo, Daniel, & Butson, 2021). Taken together, the literature indicates that ODDE as a learning environment for school leavers should be analysed through a multi-dimensional and multi-level lens that connects digital access and learner background (mesosystem) with learning design, relationships, and real-time engagement patterns (microsystem).

For ODDE school leavers, engagement is socially situated and shaped by context. A bioecological view positions learner within nested systems where family background, socioeconomic conditions, and access to devices influence participation (Bond, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Engagement is further shaped by teacher–student interaction, meaningful tasks, and learners' psychosocial resources such as self-efficacy and self-regulation (Bandura,

1995; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). These interrelated influences are illustrated in the Bioecological Model of Student Engagement (see Figure 1; Bond, 2020a, 2020b).

Figure 1
Bioecological Model of Student Engagement



Source: (Bond, 2020a, 2020b)

Relevance of Social Sciences and Humanities Education in Applied and Local Contexts

The choice of academic pathway among school leavers is shaped by a combination of institutional exposure, social background, perceived relevance of programmes, and personal aspirations. Research has shown that schooling experiences play a formative role in shaping university participation, particularly through academic guidance, subject exposure, and encouragement to pursue post-secondary education (Taylor et al., 2018). Within this process, Social Sciences and Humanities education occupies a distinctive position, as it appeals to learners who value meaning, social contribution, and personal growth alongside employment prospects. Studies on university choice indicate that programme selection is rarely based on academic performance alone. Instead, factors such as interest, values, perceived fit, and future orientation exert strong influence. Sakalasooriya (2025) demonstrates that school leavers' decisions are structured around clusters of motivational, personal, and environmental factors, suggesting that disciplines offering broad applicability and human relevance are more likely to attract diverse learners. Social Sciences programmes respond to this pattern by addressing social issues, human behaviour, and community needs, which resonate with learners who seek purposeful educational trajectories. Life-story research further highlights the motivational role of Social Sciences in academic decision-making. Corrales Serrano et al. (2021) found that students choosing Social Sciences frequently link their choices to identity formation, social awareness, and a desire to understand societal dynamics. Such motivations differ from narrowly instrumental choices and suggest that Social Sciences and Humanities education supports reflective decision-making, where learners align academic pathways with personal values and lived experiences. This is particularly relevant for school leavers, who often balance study with employment and family responsibilities, and thus favour programmes that connect directly with real-world contexts.

Beyond entry decisions, subject choice has implications for longer-term learner outcomes. Iannelli and Duta (2018) show that school subject choices influence labour-market positioning, with inequalities emerging when access to certain fields is socially patterned. While STEM subjects often dominate economic discussions, Social Sciences contribute differently by developing transferable skills such as analytical reasoning, communication, and social

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understanding, which support adaptability across sectors. These capabilities are especially valuable in labour markets characterised by change and uncertainty. Learner development within Social Sciences and Humanities education extends beyond academic knowledge. Research on self-efficacy indicates that learners who lack confidence in decision-making or future planning may experience constrained career aspirations (Hoang & Huy, 2021). Social Sciences programmes, through reflective learning and applied inquiry, create space for learners to strengthen self-belief, clarify goals, and understand their social positioning. This developmental role is critical for school leavers transitioning into adulthood and employment. Contextual factors such as rurality, socioeconomic status, and gender further shape academic choices. Koricich et al. (2018) highlight that learners from rural or lower-income backgrounds face structural barriers that influence institutional and programme selection. Social Sciences and Humanities education, often offered through flexible or distance modes, can reduce such barriers by widening access and supporting non-traditional learners. At the same time, gendered patterns in subject choice, as discussed by Card and Payne (2021), suggest that Social Sciences may serve as inclusive spaces where learners who are under-represented in STEM fields can develop confidence and academic identity. Evidence from the Malaysian context reinforces these global patterns. Studies on post-SPM and pre-university choices show that interest, perceived relevance, institutional reputation, and family influence shape programme selection (Anuar, 2025; Mati et al., 2022). Subject-specific research, such as interest in English language and humanities-related disciplines, highlights the role of early exposure and positive learning experiences in sustaining motivation (Zakaria & Nawawi, 2020). Conversely, qualitative findings on school leavers who choose not to pursue further study point to financial pressure, limited guidance, and low confidence as key constraints (Bakar et al., 2024), reinforcing the need for disciplines that support holistic learner development.

Motivational studies among upper secondary learners further indicate that encouragement, perceived future benefit, and personal aspiration drive progression to undergraduate study (Leng et al., 2023). Social Sciences programmes contribute to this progression by framing education as a means of understanding self and society, rather than solely as credential acquisition. This orientation aligns well with ODDE learners, particularly school leavers, who value flexibility, relevance, and personal growth alongside academic achievement. Overall, the literature suggests that Social Sciences and Humanities education plays a dual role in shaping academic choice and fostering learner development. It attracts learners through value-based motivations and supports their growth through the development of critical thinking, self-efficacy, and social awareness. These contributions position Social Sciences programmes as a key component in supporting inclusive participation and meaningful learner development within open and distance education settings.

21st Century Learner Qualities and Cross-Disciplinary Competency Development

Higher education in the 21st century is increasingly expected to extend beyond the transmission of disciplinary knowledge towards the holistic development of learners who are able to function effectively within complex social, professional, and personal contexts. Contemporary scholarship highlights that learners are required to cultivate a broad range of qualities, including critical and creative thinking, adaptability, autonomy, collaboration, ethical awareness, and emotional regulation, in order to respond to evolving societal and workplace expectations (Pellaud et al., 2021). These learner qualities are particularly relevant for school leavers engaged in Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE), where academic responsibilities must be managed alongside employment demands and everyday life challenges. Rather than conceptualising learning outcomes as discrete skills or subject-bound competencies, current literature increasingly frames 21st century learner qualities as integrated and cross-disciplinary. Pellaud et al. (2021) argue that competencies emerge through learners' ability to mobilise cognitive, metacognitive, social, and emotional resources simultaneously when responding to authentic situations. This view aligns with competency-based education, which positions learning as the meaningful application of knowledge across varied contexts rather than the accumulation of theoretical understanding alone. Within this approach, competencies such as self-regulation, reflective thinking, ethical judgement, and interpersonal communication are developed through interconnected learning experiences across disciplines.

Empirical studies further underscore the importance of social-emotional and metacognitive competencies in sustaining learner engagement and academic achievement, particularly within flexible and online learning settings. Research demonstrates that emotional intelligence, encompassing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy, contributes significantly to academic performance and learning persistence (MacCann et al., 2020). In ODDE environments, where learners operate with increased independence and limited face-to-face supervision, such qualities

become central to effective time management, sustained motivation, and constructive responses to academic and workplace pressures. Post-pandemic scholarship on online and distance education similarly indicates that learners who demonstrate adaptability, resilience, and reflective capacity are better equipped to manage the demands of digitally mediated learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). Social Sciences and Humanities education is particularly well positioned to foster these cross-disciplinary competencies. Existing literature recognises that these fields engage directly with human behaviour, social interaction, values formation, communication, and ethical reasoning—dimensions closely linked to personal growth and workplace effectiveness. Rather than functioning solely as theoretical domains, Social Sciences and Humanities programmes increasingly adopt applied learning activities, reflective assessments, and context-based tasks that encourage learners to relate academic concepts to lived social and occupational experiences (Pellaud et al., 2021). Through these approaches, learners are encouraged to analyse social issues, reflect on personal values, articulate perspectives, and develop sensitivity towards diverse viewpoints, contributing to the formation of transferable 21st century competencies.

Within ODDE contexts, programme structures and assessment designs play a significant role in supporting cross-disciplinary competency development. Flexible learning arrangements, asynchronous participation, and applied or reflective assessment formats require learners to exercise self-direction, manage competing priorities, and engage in ongoing self-monitoring (Ratten, 2021). These features promote autonomy, perseverance, and metacognitive awareness, attributes widely associated with lifelong learning and employability. In this sense, ODDE functions not merely as an alternative mode of content delivery but as a learning environment that actively shapes learner habits, behaviours, and dispositions through its structural demands. For school leavers, the integration of academic study with continuous employment offers meaningful opportunities for competency development when programme intentions align with learners' lived realities. Recent studies indicate that learning outcomes which foreground communication skills, ethical awareness, interpersonal understanding, and reflective practice are more likely to support the transfer of academic learning into workplace contexts (Pellaud et al., 2021; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). This reinforces the position that the value of Social Sciences and Humanities education lies in its capacity to link theoretical perspectives with practical social and occupational challenges.

Against this backdrop, the present study positions Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through ODDE as a developmental platform for nurturing 21st century learner qualities among school leavers. By examining programme structures, learning outcomes, and assessment designs across Counselling, and English language studies, the study responds to calls for empirical evidence on how cross-disciplinary competencies are embedded within higher education curricula.

Research Questions

The research questions of this research are:

1. How do Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through ODDE support the development of cross-disciplinary competencies among school leavers?
2. To what extent do programme structures, learning outcomes, and assessment designs reflect the relevance of Social Sciences and Humanities education to the social and occupational contexts of school leavers?
3. What types of metacognitive, cognitive, and social-emotional competencies are emphasised within ODDE-based Social Sciences and Humanities programmes for school leavers?

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) position competency development and contextual relevance for school leavers. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore curriculum intentions, learning orientations, and competency-related structures embedded within programme documents rather than measure learner outcomes quantitatively. The study was guided by Merriam's (2009) interpretive case study approach, which emphasises understanding meaning and context within real educational settings. The case study design enabled an in-depth examination of how programme learning outcomes, curriculum

structures, and assessment orientations reflect broader educational intentions related to learner development, transferable competencies, and workplace relevance within ODDE environments. The focus of the study was therefore not on evaluating actual student performance, but on understanding how competency-oriented learning is formally articulated within programme documentation.

Research Context

The study focused on selected Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through ODDE within a higher education setting. The programmes examined represent two disciplinary areas, namely counselling and English language studies. These fields were selected because of their strong emphasis on communication, ethical understanding, interpersonal awareness, reflective learning, and psychosocial development, which are closely associated with the broader developmental needs of school leavers. Both programmes were also selected due to their relevance within flexible learning environments where learners often balance academic study alongside employment and personal responsibilities. As such, the programmes provided a suitable context for examining how competency-oriented curriculum intentions are embedded within Social Sciences and Humanities education delivered through ODDE.

Data Source and Document Selection

Data were collected through document analysis of official academic materials related to the selected programmes. The documents included programme structures, programme learning outcomes, course outlines, course learning outcomes, assessment descriptions, and curriculum-related academic guidelines. These materials were selected because they formally represent institutional expectations regarding learner development, competency orientation, assessment practices, and pedagogical priorities. Only authorised and current programme documents actively used for academic implementation were included in the analysis to ensure relevance and credibility. Documents that were outdated, incomplete, or unrelated to curriculum and assessment structures were excluded from the study.

Data Collection Procedure

Relevant documents were obtained through institutional academic repositories and programme records. The collected materials were first screened to confirm their relevance to Social Sciences and Humanities education and their applicability to ODDE delivery contexts. The documents were then organised according to programme type, course level, and document category to support systematic analysis and comparison across the selected programmes. As the study focused exclusively on institutional curriculum documents, no personal data or student-identifiable information were involved.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The analysis began with repeated reading of all programme documents to develop familiarity with the content and identify recurring patterns related to competency development, learner engagement, curriculum orientation, and workplace relevance. During the initial stage of coding, segments of text relating to learner qualities, assessment practices, communication skills, reflective learning, ethical awareness, autonomy, and contextual application were assigned preliminary descriptive codes. The coding process was conducted manually to allow close interpretation of curriculum language and programme intentions within the analysed documents.

In the second stage of analysis, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories reflecting cognitive, metacognitive, and social-emotional competencies, as well as themes associated with learner autonomy, contextual relevance, and ODDE-oriented learning structures. Themes were continuously reviewed and refined through comparison across programme documents to ensure consistency, conceptual alignment, and relevance to the study's research questions. To strengthen interpretive credibility, the researchers engaged in collaborative review and discussion throughout the coding and theme development process. Emerging themes were repeatedly checked against the original programme documents to ensure that interpretations accurately reflected the documented curriculum intentions rather than individual assumptions or subjective interpretation. The final themes were then interpreted in

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relation to existing literature on competency-based education, learner engagement, and the developmental role of Social Sciences and Humanities education within ODDE environments.

Results

Development of Cross-Disciplinary Competencies Through ODDE-Based Social Sciences and Humanities Programmes

The document analysis indicates that cross-disciplinary competencies are intentionally embedded across different Social Sciences and Humanities fields delivered through ODDE, particularly within counselling and English studies programmes (Lim, 2025). Rather than confining learning outcomes to discipline-specific knowledge, programme documents consistently articulate competencies that extend across academic, social, and occupational domains.

Overall, the findings suggest that Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through ODDE adopt an integrated competency framework that transcends disciplinary boundaries (see Table 1).

Table 1

Cross-Disciplinary Competencies Embedded Across Social Sciences Fields

Social Sciences Field	Learning Focus	Cross-Disciplinary Competencies Embedded	Application Across Academic, Social, and Occupational Contexts
Counselling	Interpretation of human behaviour and social interaction	Reflective thinking, ethical judgement, interpersonal communication, emotional awareness, self-regulation (Karim et al., 2025)	Workplace interaction, community engagement, conflict management, personal development
Counselling	Engagement with ethical and social responsibility	Ethical reasoning, professional judgement, adaptability, responsibility (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016)	Decision-making in complex social and occupational situations
English Studies	Analytical reading and interpretation of texts	Critical thinking, cognitive flexibility, interpretive reasoning (Karakuş, 2024)	Information analysis, problem-solving, contextual understanding
English Studies	Persuasive, professional, and audience-based communication	Communication competence, argumentation skills, audience awareness (Ahmed, 2023)	Workplace communication, organisational discourse, public communication
English Studies	Cultural and discourse analysis	Ethical awareness, social sensitivity, reflective practice (Ogodo, J. A., 2026)	Intercultural engagement, media literacy, social participation
Across both fields	Applied and reflective learning orientation	Autonomy, adaptability, metacognitive awareness, lifelong learning orientation (Lim, 2025)	Sustained engagement in ODDE, workplace adaptability, continuous skill development

Across counselling and English language programmes, the document evidence shows that holistic competencies, contextual learning design, and cross-disciplinary outcomes operate together within ODDE environments to prepare school leavers for workplace and social participation. This integrated pattern is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

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ODDE Shapes Work-Relevant Competencies



Programme Structures and Assessment Designs Reflect the Social and Occupational Contexts of School Leavers

The analysed programme documents reveal that curriculum structures and assessment designs are intentionally aligned with the needs of school leavers. Flexible learning arrangements, applied assignments, reflective tasks, and scenario-based assessments are commonly embedded within ODDE delivery (Lim, 2025). Both counselling and English studies programmes are structured to support flexible participation, sustained engagement, and the practical application of learning within learners' everyday environments.

The structural organisation of both programmes further supports contextual relevance. Flexible pacing, asynchronous engagement, and independent learning components enable learners to integrate study with employment and family responsibilities. Programme expectations implicitly recognise learners' dual roles as employees and students, positioning learning as a continuous process embedded within lived experience rather than as an isolated academic activity (Lim, 2025) (see Table 2).

Table 2
Programme Structures and Assessment Designs Supporting Contextual Relevance in ODDE

Programme Dimension	Counselling Programmes	English Language Programmes	Developmental Relevance for School Leavers
Curriculum structure	Learning organised around interpersonal understanding, ethical reflection, and applied interpretation of human behaviour (Karim et al., 2025)	Learning organised around applied language use, discourse analysis, and communication in social and occupational contexts (Ahmed, 2023)	Supports learning grounded in real-life situations rather than abstract academic content
Assessment design	Reflective tasks, scenario-based analysis, and ethical	Text analysis, argumentative writing, professional	Encourages application of knowledge to

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Programme Dimension	Counselling Programmes	English Language Programmes	Developmental Relevance for School Leavers
	reasoning activities (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016)	communication, and audience-based tasks (Ogodo, J. A., 2026)	workplace and community contexts
Learning orientation	Emphasis on reflective inquiry and contextual interpretation	Emphasis on applied communication and contextual meaning-making	Promotes deep cognitive engagement rather than surface learning
Mode of delivery	Flexible pacing and asynchronous participation	Flexible pacing and asynchronous participation	Enables integration of study with employment and family responsibilities
Learner role	Active self-reflection, judgement, and interpretation of social situations	Independent analysis, reasoning, and communicative decision-making	Strengthens learner autonomy and responsibility
Engagement focus	Emotional awareness, ethical engagement, interpersonal sensitivity	Cognitive engagement, communication confidence, and cultural awareness	Supports behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement in ODDE
Competencies developed	Ethical judgement, self-regulation, interpersonal competence	Critical thinking, communication competence, cognitive flexibility	Builds transferable competencies across academic and workplace domains
Overall programme orientation	Context-responsive and learner-centred	Context-responsive and learner-centred	Positions learning as embedded within lived experience rather than isolated academic activity

Metacognitive, Cognitive, and Social-Emotional Competencies Emphasised in ODDE-Based Social Sciences Programmes

The document analysis indicates that programmes in counselling and English language studies place strong emphasis on holistic competency development rather than on content mastery alone. Learning outcomes consistently highlight reflective thinking, ethical awareness, communication skills, and personal development alongside academic knowledge.

Counselling Program

The document analysis indicates that counselling programmes delivered through Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) emphasise holistic competency development rather than focusing solely on disciplinary content knowledge (Lim, 2025). Programme learning outcomes, curriculum structures, and assessment orientations consistently highlight learner development across cognitive, metacognitive, and social-emotional domains. These include reflective thinking, ethical awareness, interpersonal communication, self-regulation, adaptability, and responsibility, alongside foundational academic understanding. Across the analysed counselling programme documents, learning is positioned as a developmental process that supports learners' ability to interpret social realities, manage personal and occupational challenges, and apply knowledge meaningfully within everyday contexts (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016). Rather than privileging theoretical mastery in isolation, programme intentions reflect an emphasis on transferable competencies that can be mobilised across social, workplace, and community settings, aligning with the needs of school leavers engaged in flexible learning pathways.

Overall, the findings suggest that counselling-oriented Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through ODDE function as developmental platforms that support learners' holistic growth beyond content acquisition (Lim, 2025) (see Table 3).

Table 3
Holistic Competency and Engagement-Oriented Learning Features in Counselling Programmes Delivered through ODDE

Dimension	Programme Features Identified from Document Analysis	Engagement and Developmental Implications for School Leavers
Cognitive competencies	Emphasis on understanding human behaviour, ethical decision-making, and applied conceptual interpretation (Ahmed, 2023)	Supports meaningful cognitive engagement through application of knowledge to real-life and workplace situations
Metacognitive competencies	Structured reflective tasks, self-evaluation activities, and independent learning requirements (Ahmed, 2023 & Karim et al., 2025)	Strengthens self-regulation, planning, and monitoring skills essential for sustained engagement in ODDE environments
Social-emotional competencies	Focus on empathy, emotional awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and communication skills (Ogodo, J. A., 2026)	Enhances affective engagement and supports persistence by strengthening learners' psychosocial resources
Ethical and value-based learning	Integration of ethical judgement, responsibility, and professional conduct across course outcomes (Ogodo, J. A., 2026)	Promotes socially grounded learning and reinforces relevance of counselling education to lived realities
Learning design orientation	Reflective inquiry, applied tasks, and interpretation of social contexts embedded across courses (Karakuş, 2024 & Ahmed, 2023)	Encourages deep engagement beyond surface participation, reducing risk of disengagement
ODDE structural features	Flexible pacing, asynchronous participation, and learner-directed study modes (Lim, 2025)	Enables integration of study with employment and family responsibilities among school leavers
Engagement support mechanisms	Emphasis on self-awareness, motivation management, and reflective capacity (Lim, 2025)	Addresses behavioural, cognitive, and affective dimensions of engagement in digital learning contexts
Overall programme orientation	Holistic, developmental, and context-responsive counselling education (Lim, 2025)	Positions ODDE as a supportive learning environment for persistence, adaptability, and lifelong learning

English Language Program

The document analysis indicates that English programmes delivered through Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) emphasise holistic competency development rather than focusing solely on disciplinary content knowledge. Programme learning outcomes, curriculum structures, and assessment orientations consistently foreground learner development across cognitive, metacognitive, and social-emotional domains (Lim, 2025). These include critical thinking, reflective practice, ethical awareness, interpersonal communication, adaptability, autonomy, and responsibility, alongside foundational disciplinary understanding. Across the analysed programme documents, learning is positioned as a developmental process that supports learners' capacity to interpret social realities, manage occupational and personal demands, and apply academic knowledge meaningfully within everyday contexts (LIM, 2025).

Taken together, the findings indicate that English language programmes delivered through ODDE function not merely as sites for language acquisition but as engagement-oriented developmental platforms (Ahmed, 2023) (see Table 4).

Table 4
Holistic Competency and Engagement-Oriented Learning Features in English Language Programmes Delivered through ODDE

Dimension	Programme Features Identified from Document Analysis	Engagement and Developmental Implications for School Leavers
Cognitive competencies	Emphasis on critical reading, analytical writing, discourse interpretation, and evaluative reasoning (Karakuş, 2024)	Supports deep cognitive engagement through analysis, problem-solving, and interpretation of real-world texts
Metacognitive competencies	Independent learning tasks, reflective writing, and self-directed study requirements (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016)	Strengthens planning, monitoring, and self-regulation essential for sustained engagement in ODDE
Social-emotional competencies	Communication-focused learning, interaction awareness, and sensitivity to social and cultural contexts (Karakuş, 2024)	Enhances affective engagement and confidence in interpersonal and workplace communication
Ethical and value-based learning	Integration of ethical awareness, responsible communication, and professional conduct (Forester-Miller & Davis, 2016)	Promotes socially responsible language use and contextual sensitivity in public and organisational settings
Communication competencies	Emphasis on professional writing, argumentation, audience awareness, and applied communication practices (Karim et al., 2025 & Ahmed, 2023)	Develops transferable communication skills aligned with workplace and societal demands
Learning design orientation	Applied tasks, contextual text analysis, and reflective inquiry embedded across courses (Lim, 2025)	Encourages meaningful engagement beyond surface participation and content memorisation
ODDE structural features	Flexible pacing, asynchronous learning, and independent engagement with learning materials (Lim, 2025)	Enables learners to balance study with employment and family commitments
Engagement support mechanisms	Emphasis on autonomy, motivation management, reflective capacity, and persistence (Lim, 2025)	Supports behavioural, cognitive, and affective engagement in digital learning environments
Overall programme orientation	Holistic, competency-based, and context-responsive English language education (Lim, 2025)	Positions ODDE as a developmental pathway supporting lifelong learning and workplace adaptability

Discussion

The findings show that Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) support the development of cross-disciplinary competencies among school leavers through learning outcomes, curriculum structures, and assessments that extend beyond discipline-specific knowledge. Across counselling and English language programmes, the analysed documents consistently emphasise communication skills, ethical awareness, reflective thinking, adaptability, learner autonomy, and critical reasoning. This pattern indicates that both programmes share broader developmental intentions associated with transferable competencies relevant across academic, workplace, and social settings. These findings align with contemporary perspectives that position higher education as a platform for holistic learner development and lifelong learning rather than a space focused solely on disciplinary specialisation (Pellaud et al., 2021). A clear pattern across the findings is the strong emphasis on applied and reflective learning. In the counselling programme, the curriculum documents foreground reflective inquiry, ethical understanding, interpersonal sensitivity, and emotional awareness. In the English language programme, the documents emphasise analytical communication, contextual interpretation, audience awareness, and professional communication practices. These findings suggest that competency development is embedded through practical and context-related learning activities rather than through theoretical instruction alone. This supports the view of Pellaud et al. (2021), who

argue that competencies are developed when learners apply cognitive, social, and reflective capacities together in authentic situations.

The findings further indicate that the analysed programmes are structured in ways that recognise the realities faced by school leavers within ODDE environments. Flexible pacing, asynchronous participation, independent learning tasks, and reflective assessments were consistently reflected across the programme documents. This suggests that learner autonomy and self-regulation are treated as part of the learning process itself rather than merely technical requirements of online learning. Existing research similarly highlights that learners in digital and distance education environments require adaptability, reflective capacity, and independent learning skills to sustain participation and manage competing responsibilities (MacCann et al., 2020; Bergdahl, 2022c). The programme structures, learning outcomes, and assessment designs also reflect clear relevance to the social and occupational contexts of school leavers. The curriculum and assessment structures encourage learners to connect academic learning with workplace communication, ethical decision-making, interpersonal interaction, and social realities. In this sense, the findings support Alatas's (2001) argument that Social Sciences knowledge becomes meaningful when it is connected to lived experiences and local realities rather than remaining abstract and detached from everyday contexts. The analysis, therefore, suggests that the programme positions Social Sciences and Humanities education as socially relevant and practically meaningful for school leavers who are managing employment and further education at the same time. The findings also reveal that the analysed programmes emphasise metacognitive, cognitive, and social-emotional competencies within ODDE-based Social Sciences and Humanities education. Cognitive competencies are reflected through critical thinking, analytical interpretation, ethical reasoning, and applied problem-solving. Metacognitive competencies are evident in reflective tasks, self-directed learning expectations, planning, monitoring, and self-regulation. Social-emotional competencies appear through the emphasis on empathy, emotional awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, communication confidence, and cultural awareness. Across both programmes, these competency domains operate together rather than as separate learning outcomes.

This finding is significant for school leavers in ODDE settings, as they often need to manage academic responsibilities alongside employment, family, and personal commitments. The integration of cognitive, metacognitive, and social-emotional competencies supports learners in developing habits of reflection, independent judgement, and responsible communication. Such competencies are especially relevant in flexible learning environments where learners must regulate their own learning, respond to social and occupational challenges, and translate academic understanding into practical action. The findings therefore suggest that counselling and English language programmes function as developmental platforms that support learners' holistic growth beyond content acquisition. At the same time, the study does not claim that these competencies are necessarily achieved by learners in practice, as the analysis focused specifically on programme documents rather than student experiences or performance outcomes. Instead, the findings demonstrate how competency-oriented intentions are formally embedded within curriculum structures, programme learning outcomes, and assessment designs across selected Social Sciences and Humanities programmes delivered through ODDE. In this regard, the study contributes to existing ODDE literature by providing insight into how programme-level curriculum design reflects institutional expectations regarding learner development, flexibility, and contextual relevance for school leavers. Overall, the findings suggest that the analysed Social Sciences and Humanities programmes are intentionally structured to support broader learner development through applied, reflective, and context-responsive curriculum orientations.

Conclusion

This study shows that Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) provides more than access for school leavers; it also creates a structured learning environment where Social Sciences and Humanities programmes can shape work-relevant, transferable competencies. Document analysis across counselling and English language programmes indicates that curriculum intentions and assessment designs consistently prioritise holistic learner development, including critical thinking, reflective practice, ethical awareness, communication, self-regulation, and adaptability (Lim, 2025). These competency orientations align with competency-based perspectives that define learning as the mobilisation of integrated cognitive, metacognitive, and social-emotional resources in authentic situations (Allal, 2002; Perrenoud, 2004; Tardif, 2006), and correspond with 21st century frameworks that emphasise autonomy, collaboration, openness to change, and reflective capacity (Pellaud et al., 2021).

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The programmes also demonstrate strong contextual relevance through applied tasks and reflective assessments that connect academic content to real workplace and social challenges faced by learners, addressing concerns about social knowledge becoming detached from lived realities (Alatas, 2001). Within ODDE settings, flexible pacing and asynchronous participation further reinforce autonomy and metacognitive engagement, which are linked to learning persistence and success in online education (MacCann et al., 2020; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). Overall, the findings position counselling and English language programmes as context-responsive developmental platforms that support early career growth and meaningful social participation for school leavers, while reinforcing the continued relevance of Social Sciences and Humanities education in contemporary higher education pathways.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study is based on document analysis within one institution and focuses only on selected programmes, which means the findings reflect intended curriculum design rather than how learning is actually experienced by school leavers. It does not include students' voices, tutors' practices, or evidence from learning platforms, assessments, or workplace outcomes, so the discussion cannot fully capture real engagement challenges or competency development in practice. Future studies can build on this work by involving school leavers and educators directly, combining interviews with learning analytics and assessment evidence, and following learners over time to understand how ODDE-based Social Sciences education supports early career growth and long-term development.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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