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**FROM COMMUNICATION TO CONNECTION:  
A CONCEPTUAL PAPER IN EXAMINING THE ROLE OF  
RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN STRENGTHENING  
CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION IN OPEN,  
DISTANCE AND DIGITAL EDUCATION**

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**Abstract:**

Communication in Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) institutions is often treated as a functional process centred on information exchange, coordination, and service delivery. Yet in digitally mediated universities, communication that is frequent and efficient may still fall short of producing genuine interpersonal connection across staff roles. This conceptual paper argues that the quality of communication between academic and non-academic staff should be examined through a relational lens, particularly in settings where collaboration is necessary for effective student support. Drawing on John C. Maxwell's connecting principles, the paper proposes that communication becomes more effective when it is grounded in attentiveness to others, common purpose, responsiveness, and intentional relational effort. The discussion integrates recent scholarship on internal communication, empathic communication, social presence,

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and cross-functional collaboration in higher education to argue that connection-oriented communication is an important institutional capability in ODDE settings. A conceptual framework is advanced in which connecting principles are positioned as predictors of communication effectiveness and collaborative support for students, with staff role included as a moderator and communication effectiveness proposed as a mediating factor. The paper also outlines a quantitative survey-based methodology suitable for testing the proposed relationships within an ODDE university. Conceptually, the paper extends current discussion on digital education by shifting attention towards staff-to-staff communication as a critical yet underexamined dimension of institutional functioning. Practically, it offers a foundation for future research, staff development, and communication-focused interventions aimed at strengthening collaboration and improving coordinated student support in digitally mediated higher education environments.

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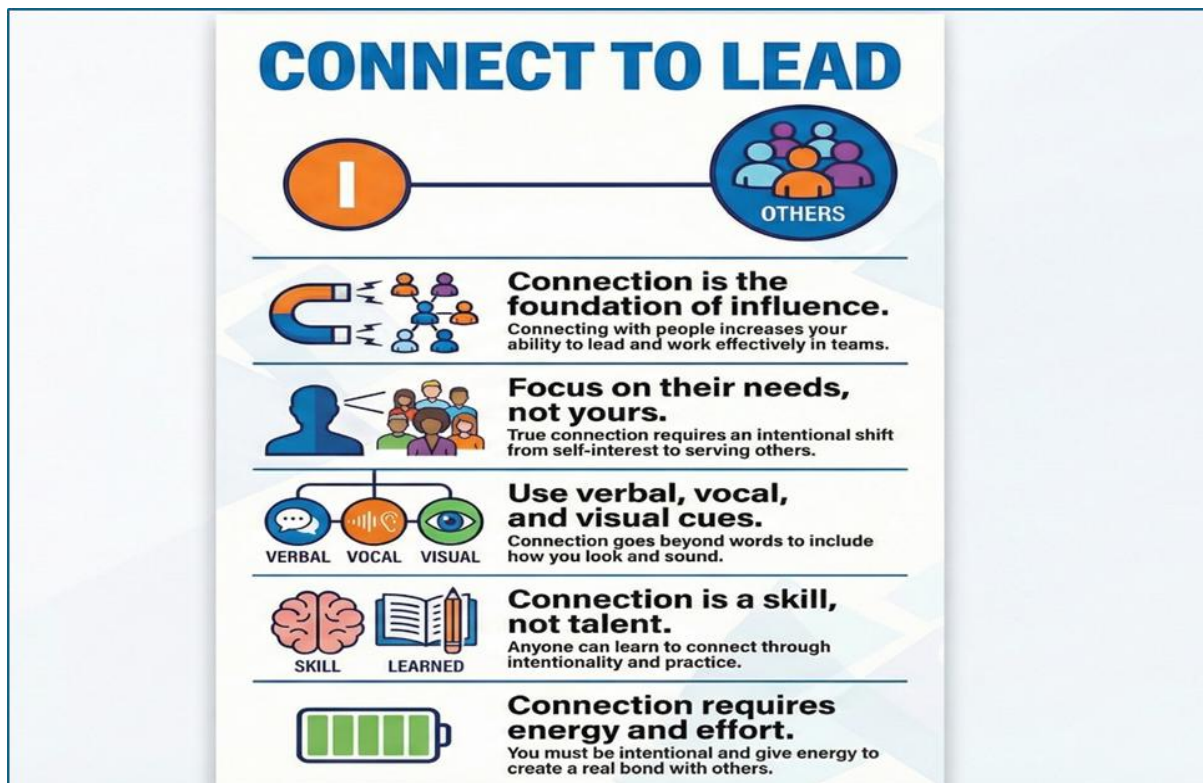
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**Introduction**

Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) has transformed the delivery of higher education by expanding access, flexibility, and institutional reach through technology-mediated teaching, learning, and administrative systems (Loglo, 2024). Within this model, communication functions as a central mechanism through which academic operations, student services, and institutional coordination are sustained. Yet the increasing dependence on digital platforms has not automatically resolved the human dimension of communication. In ODDE environments, communication frequently occurs through emails, learning management systems, virtual meetings, and online support channels, but the efficiency of message transmission does not necessarily translate into interpersonal understanding, trust, or collaborative cohesion. This distinction is especially significant in institutions where academic and non-academic staff must work interdependently to support learners across distributed and digitally mediated settings. The present study is built on the premise that effective communication in ODDE must move beyond the exchange of information towards authentic interpersonal connection.

This issue may be meaningfully examined through John C. Maxwell's framework in *Everyone Communicates, Few Connect*, which argues that communication becomes influential only when it creates a sense of being understood, valued, and engaged (Maxwell, 2010). Maxwell's emphasis on focusing on others, going beyond words, finding common ground, and investing

energy in communication provides a relational lens that is highly relevant to digitally mediated educational organisations. In contrast with transactional models of workplace interaction, this perspective treats communication as a socially embedded process that shapes influence, cooperation, and institutional effectiveness. Within ODDE, where staff often work across functional silos and with limited face-to-face contact, this approach offers a useful conceptual foundation for understanding why communication may be frequent yet still insufficiently effective. The paper positions this framework as a promising way to address the gap between merely exchanging messages and building the relational quality needed for coordinated support and effective collaboration.



**Figure 1 Framework in Everyone Communicates, Few Connect by John C. Maxwell**

The relevance of this issue is reinforced by scholarship showing that communication remains a persistent challenge in higher education institutions. Zainun et al. (2018) highlight that internal communication within higher education settings is closely linked to organisational functioning and staff engagement, especially when institutions are undergoing change or relying on multi-level coordination. In the ODDE context, these communication demands are intensified by physical separation, asynchronous interaction, and role differentiation. Lonie (2010) similarly notes that communication barriers emerge more acutely in settings where participants are separated by space, time, and differing contexts, making mutual understanding more difficult to establish and sustain. Although such studies do not focus exclusively on ODDE staff interaction, they support the broader concern that the absence of strong relational communication may weaken coordination, reduce clarity, and affect the quality of institutional support processes. This conceptual paper identifies a notable gap, particularly in relation to how academic and non-academic staff interact in technology-dependent university settings.

The communication gap between academic and non-academic personnel is of particular concern in ODDE institutions. Academic staff are typically oriented towards curriculum delivery, teaching, assessment, and academic quality, whereas non-academic personnel often manage administration, counselling support, student services, and operational processes. Although these roles are complementary, they may be shaped by differing priorities, communication styles, professional vocabularies, and expectations. As a result, communication between these groups may remain functional yet fragmented, with messages transmitted efficiently but without the level of relational understanding needed for shared decision-making or collaborative problem-solving. The paper characterises this condition as one in which communication remains transactional and insufficiently connected, producing risks such as misunderstanding, reduced trust, weak coordination, and fragmented student support. In ODDE institutions, where student experience often depends on seamless cross-functional interaction, such fragmentation may have consequences that extend beyond staff relations to the quality and timeliness of services delivered to learners.

At the centre of the problem is the fact that institutional communication may be occurring in quantity but not necessarily in quality (Lammers & Barbour 2006). Frequent emails, meetings, directives, and administrative exchanges may create the appearance of coordination without producing genuine connection between colleagues. This is where Maxwell's framework becomes conceptually useful, and this paper suggests that influence and effectiveness increase when communicators prioritise others, search for common purpose, and engage intentionally rather than superficially. Applied to ODDE, this implies that communication problems are not merely procedural or technological; they are relational. Staff may possess access to multiple communication channels yet still experience disconnection if those interactions do not convey attentiveness, empathy, clarity, and mutual regard. Such disconnection may manifest in academic staff perceiving inadequate support from administrative units, or non-academic staff experiencing exclusion from academic processes that affect student welfare. These are not minor operational issues; they point to a deeper institutional challenge concerning how communication practices shape collaboration and service quality.

From a conceptual standpoint, this study responds to a clear gap in the current framing of communication within ODDE institutions. Much of the discussion on digital education has focused on student engagement, online pedagogy, or the technical quality of mediated communication. Comparatively less attention has been directed towards staff-to-staff communication as an institutional process that underpins coordinated student support. The paper usefully extends this concern by proposing that the relational qualities commonly associated with empathy, active engagement, and connection should be examined more directly in staff interactions. In this sense, the paper does not treat connection as an abstract interpersonal ideal, but as a practical organisational capability with implications for teamwork, trust, communication effectiveness, and the collective ability of staff to respond to student needs. By positioning Maxwell's principles within this context, the study offers a novel intersection between leadership communication, relational interaction, and ODDE organisational practice.

Accordingly, the central problem addressed in this study is that communication between academic and non-academic staff in ODDE universities may remain largely transactional, despite the institution's reliance on collaboration across roles and departments. This transactional pattern may limit genuine connection, weaken coordination, and reduce the effectiveness of joint efforts to support students. The study therefore seeks to examine whether

Maxwell's connecting principles provide a meaningful framework for understanding and improving communication quality among ODDE staff. Rather than assuming that communication frequency is sufficient, the study questions whether staff practise connection-oriented behaviours in ways that strengthen institutional collaboration.

To address this problem, the study is guided by three research questions. The first asks whether academic and non-academic staff differ significantly in their self-reported use of connecting behaviours during workplace communication. This question is relevant for identifying whether role-based differences shape how communication is enacted and experienced across the institution. The second asks whether there is a significant relationship between the use of connecting principles and perceived communication effectiveness in an ODDE environment. This addresses the possibility that stronger relational communication may be associated with greater understanding, fewer misunderstandings, and more effective workplace interaction. The third asks the extent to which connecting principles predict successful collaboration in supporting students at the ODDE university. This question extends the inquiry from interpersonal interaction to institutional function, recognising that communication quality may influence how well different staff groups work together in responding to student needs. Taken together, these questions situate the study within a broader concern for how connection-centred communication may improve both staff relationships and organisational outcomes in digitally mediated higher education.

This paper therefore argues that communication in ODDE institutions should be conceptualised not merely as information exchange, but as a relational process through which shared purpose, trust, and coordinated action are built. In advancing this argument, the study contributes to the growing conversation on the human dimensions of digital education by foregrounding staff interaction as a critical yet underexamined domain. It further proposes that Maxwell's principles offer a practical and theoretically relevant lens for examining communication quality within higher education settings where interpersonal contact is often mediated, compressed, or structurally fragmented. In doing so, the study aims to contribute both conceptually and practically: conceptually by extending relational communication thinking into ODDE staff contexts, and practically by offering a basis for interventions that may strengthen collaboration and student support within digital universities.

## Literature Review

### *Interpersonal Communication as A Relational Process*

Communication research in organisations has moved well beyond the view that communication is merely the transmission of information. In institutional settings, communication carries relational meaning, which it signals respect, recognition, credibility, and willingness to cooperate. This is especially relevant in higher education, where staff relationships are shaped by interdependence across academic, administrative, counselling, and student-support functions. In such contexts, effective communication is tied to mutual understanding and role coordination rather than message delivery alone. Recent higher education research has shown that internal communication is closely associated with employee engagement, job satisfaction, and loyalty, suggesting that the quality of communication contributes to how staff relate to the institution and to one another (Nguyen & Ha, 2023).

Maxwell's argument that many people communicate without truly connecting fits within this relational tradition. Although Maxwell writes from a leadership and professional communication perspective rather than an ODDE framework, his central premise is highly transferable: communication becomes effective when it reaches the person rather than stopping at the message. In higher education, this distinction matters. Policies, instructions, reminders, and requests may circulate efficiently, yet staff can still experience distance, misunderstanding, or exclusion if the interaction lacks attentiveness and relational clarity.

### ***Connecting Principles and Their Relevance to Workplace Communication***

The five principles drawn from Maxwell's framework provide a practical basis for conceptualising connection in institutional communication: connection increases influence, connection is about others, connection goes beyond words, connection requires energy, and connection is more skill than natural talent. Treated analytically, these principles describe behaviours that shape relational quality in communication. They direct attention to whether a communicator listens carefully, adapts to others, seeks common ground, conveys care, and sustains interaction through effort rather than routine.

Recent workplace research supports the relevance of these dimensions. Empathic communication has been linked to lower workplace loneliness and stronger relational climates, with both leaders' and colleagues' empathic communication showing meaningful explanatory value in organisational settings (Jin & Ikeda, 2023). Related work on active-empathic listening continues to show that effective listening involves emotional awareness, cognitive processing, and responsive engagement rather than passive hearing, making it a useful behavioural anchor for connection-centred communication (Özçılınak & Yüksel., 2025). These findings support the view that connection is not a vague interpersonal ideal. It is observable in communication practices that can be assessed, strengthened, and translated into organisational routines.

### ***Social Presence in Digitally Mediated Interaction***

The ODDE context gives this study its distinct value. Communication in digitally mediated universities occurs through email, messaging systems, virtual meetings, academic portals, and structured reporting channels (Benke & Widger, 2023). These media support continuity and efficiency, yet they can reduce communicative richness if interaction becomes overly procedural. This is where social presence theory becomes useful. Recent theoretical work has shown that social presence helps explain how people experience others as psychologically "there" in online, hybrid, and asynchronous communication. Higher levels of social presence are associated with trust, community-building, collaborative meaning-making, and lower perceptions of isolation in mediated environments (Kreijns et al., 2024).

Recent higher education studies continue to support this point. Humanised online interaction has been associated with stronger emotional engagement, collaborative learning, and sense of belonging, especially when communication includes personalised responses, active involvement, and visible care from participants (Pujasari et al., 2025). Although much of this work focuses on teaching and student learning, the underlying principle is relevant to staff communication in ODDE institutions, which is when interaction signals presence, attention, and responsiveness, collaboration becomes easier and relational distance is reduced. This makes social presence a useful supporting lens for your conceptual model, especially for the principle that connection goes beyond words. In digital settings, staff often need to compensate

for limited non-verbal cues by being more deliberate in timing, tone, acknowledgement, and follow-through.

### ***Academic And Non-Academic Staff Interaction in Higher Education***

The literature on higher education work has increasingly challenged the traditional separation between academic and professional roles. Recent scholarship on the “third space” argues that universities now depend on forms of work that cut across the academic/professional divide, particularly in areas linked to student success, support services, engagement, curriculum delivery, and institutional coordination (Thorpe & Partridge, 2024). This line of work suggests that role boundaries remain real, but the institution increasingly requires collaboration that transcends those boundaries.

Related empirical work has shown that cross-functional professional learning communities involving faculty, staff, and administrators can support broader culture change in higher education by creating shared learning, stronger institutional coordination, and collective responsibility for student success (Kezar et al., 2025). This is highly relevant to the present study, where the communication issue is not merely interpersonal; it is organisational. Academic and non-academic staff often bring different professional assumptions, response patterns, and definitions of urgency. Without connection-oriented communication, these differences can harden into silos. With stronger connection, they may instead become complementary strengths.

### ***Communication Effectiveness and Collaboration in Student Support***

A core claim in this study is that connecting behaviours should be associated with better communication outcomes and stronger collaboration in supporting students. This expectation has both conceptual and empirical support. Internal communication research in higher education has shown that communication quality is linked with employee engagement and organisational attachment, indicating that staff do not respond only to formal structure; they respond to how communication is enacted and experienced (Nguyen & Ha, 2023). In mediated learning environments, social presence research similarly suggests that relationally attentive communication supports collaboration and reduces misunderstanding (Kreijns et al., 2024).

The implication for ODDE institutions is direct. Student support rarely sits within a single office or role. Academic staff, registry personnel, counsellors, programme administrators, and other support staff often need to interpret information jointly, respond quickly, and coordinate action across systems. When communication is disconnected, student matters may be delayed, duplicated, or handled inconsistently. When communication is attentive and relationally grounded, collaboration is more likely to become timely, respectful, and solution oriented. On that basis, the present conceptual paper argues that connection-centred communication should be treated as a meaningful antecedent of communication effectiveness and collaborative student support in ODDE settings.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is grounded in the argument that communication within an Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) university should be examined as a relational process rather than a purely procedural exchange. In digitally mediated institutions, staff communication occurs

through media that support coordination, yet their presence does not by itself produce shared understanding, trust, or cooperation. Research on social presence in online and hybrid education continues to show that interaction becomes more effective when communication conveys attentiveness (Capozzi & Ristic, 2018), responsiveness, and a sense of psychological presence, rather than remaining limited to task transmission alone.

Within this context, the present study adopts Maxwell's connecting principles as the main explanatory lens for understanding communication quality among academic and non-academic staff. The framework as shown in Table 1 below assumes that connection-oriented communication is reflected in five broad tendencies: valuing others in interaction, creating common ground, communicating beyond literal words, investing effort and emotional energy in the exchange, and treating connection as a learnable communication skill. Although Maxwell's original work is practitioner-oriented, these principles align closely with recent scholarship on empathic communication, which shows that communication marked by empathy, responsiveness, and relational awareness contributes to healthier workplace interaction and stronger interpersonal outcomes. Studies on empathic communication have linked such behaviours with reduced workplace isolation, stronger collegial relations, and better communication climates.

The framework proposes that connecting principles function as the independent variable, since they represent the underlying communication orientation that shapes how staff interact with one another. Staff who communicate with stronger connection-oriented behaviours are expected to be more attentive to others' needs, more adaptive in their communication style, and more likely to create constructive exchanges across role boundaries. In an ODDE institution, this matters greatly, as academic and non-academic staff often work from different professional assumptions, priorities, and timelines. Communication that remains purely transactional may keep work moving at a basic level, yet it may not be sufficient for complex collaboration involving student welfare, academic processes, and service coordination.

The first outcome variable in the framework is communication effectiveness. This construct refers to the degree to which staff perceive communication as clear, timely, understandable, and useful for coordinated action. The model assumes that when staff practise stronger connecting principles, communication becomes more effective, since messages are more likely to be interpreted accurately and received in a constructive manner. This proposition is supported by recent work on digital and hybrid interaction, which suggests that communication quality is strengthened when relational cues are made visible and when participants experience the other party as present, engaged, and responsive.

The second outcome variable is collaborative support for students. This construct captures the extent to which staff can work across units in handling student-related matters, such as referral, problem-solving, case follow-up, and joint decision-making. In an ODDE setting, student support rarely rests with one unit alone. Academic staff, programme administrators, counsellors, student affairs personnel, and other support staff often need to share information and coordinate decisions. Recent higher education research has highlighted the growing significance of cross-functional collaboration and "third space" work, where institutional effectiveness depends on interaction across traditional academic and professional boundaries. This makes collaboration a suitable outcome of connection-centred communication in the present model.

The framework further proposes that communication effectiveness may mediate the relationship between connecting principles and collaborative support for students. In other words, connecting principles are expected to strengthen collaboration partly through their influence on the quality of everyday communication. This mediation pathway gives the model stronger theoretical coherence. It suggests that staff do not move directly from interpersonal connection to successful collaboration without an intermediate communication process. Instead, connection-oriented communication improves clarity, responsiveness, and mutual understanding, which in turn supports more coordinated work across departments and roles. This is consistent with current evidence showing that relationally rich communication contributes to engagement and collaboration in mediated settings.

The framework also includes staff role as a moderator, distinguishing between academic and non-academic staff. This part of the model is important because these two groups may differ in the way they communicate, the pressures they face, and the meanings they attach to effective interaction. Academic staff may prioritise instructional, curricular, and scholarly matters, whereas non-academic staff may focus on operational, administrative, and support processes. These differences do not imply opposition, but they may influence communication patterns and expectations. The framework therefore allows a comparison of whether connecting principles are practised similarly across both groups, and whether their effects on communication effectiveness and collaboration are equally strong.

Taken together, the conceptual framework argues that connection-oriented communication is an institutional resource in ODDE universities. It is not treated here as a soft interpersonal preference, but as a communication capability that may improve how staff understand one another, work across boundaries, and respond to student needs. By linking Maxwell's principles with social presence and empathic communication perspectives, the framework gives the study a clearer academic foundation and positions it within current discussions on digital interaction, workplace communication, and cross-functional collaboration in higher education.

**Table 1 Conceptual Framework Table**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Role in model</b>	<b>Definition in this study</b>	<b>Key dimensions / indicators</b>
<b>Connecting Principles</b>	Independent variable	The extent to which staff communicate in ways that prioritise understanding, responsiveness, common ground, and relational engagement	Focus on others, common ground, beyond words, effort/energy, learnable skill
<b>Communication Effectiveness</b>	Mediator / dependent variable	The degree to which communication is perceived as clear, timely, constructive, and useful for coordination	Clarity, mutual understanding, responsiveness, reduced misunderstanding, usefulness
<b>Collaborative Support for Students</b>	Dependent variable	The extent to which academic and non-academic staff work	Coordination, referral, follow-up, shared problem-solving, timely support

		effectively across units to address student matters	
<b>Staff Role</b>	Moderator variable	Employment category used for comparison in the model	Academic staff, non-academic staff

## Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design is proposed to examine the relationships among connecting principles, communication effectiveness, and collaborative support for students in an Open, Distance and Digital Education (ODDE) university. The target population comprises academic and non-academic staff because both groups are directly involved in cross-functional communication and student support processes. A proportionate stratified random sampling technique is appropriate to secure adequate representation from each staff category. For Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), the minimum sample size should satisfy both statistical power requirements and model complexity. A power analysis using G\*Power may be conducted to determine the minimum required sample for detecting a medium effect size at a statistical power of .80 and an alpha level of .05. Data may be collected through a structured self-administered questionnaire consisting of four sections: demographic information, connecting principles, communication effectiveness, and collaborative support for students. All substantive items should be measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Before the main survey, the instrument should undergo expert review for content validity and a pilot test to assess item clarity, face validity, and preliminary internal consistency.

The measurement model should operationalise connecting principles as a higher-order reflective construct represented by five dimensions derived from Maxwell's framework, which is focus on others, common ground, communication beyond words, intentional effort and energy, and connection as a learnable skill. Communication effectiveness may be specified as a reflective construct measured through perceived clarity, timeliness, mutual understanding, responsiveness, and usefulness of communication. Collaborative support for students may likewise be treated as a reflective construct measured through coordination, referral quality, follow-up, shared problem-solving, and timely support across units. Staff role should be coded as a categorical moderator for multi-group comparison or moderation analysis, depending on the final analytical strategy.

The measurement model should first be assessed through indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). After satisfactory measurement quality is established, the structural model may be evaluated by examining collinearity, path coefficients, t-values and confidence intervals generated through bootstrapping, coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), effect sizes ( $f^2$ ), and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ). The mediating role of communication effectiveness should be tested through bootstrapped indirect effects, whereas differences by staff role may be examined through multi-group analysis. Descriptive statistics may be used to summarise respondent characteristics, and an independent-samples t-test may be retained only for a preliminary comparison of mean differences in connecting principles between academic and non-academic staff. Ethical considerations include informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and institutional approval prior to data collection.

## Discussion and Implications

The anticipated results underscore a central theme, which is enhancing connection in communication is a substantive requirement for effective operation in an ODDE environment. It is essential for operational success in an ODDE environment. The finding that faculty and staff differ in their connecting approaches suggests that tailored interventions might be necessary. For example, academic staff may benefit from training or resources focused on interpersonal skills and empathy (areas often less emphasised in content-focused academic training), whereas administrative staff might benefit from understanding the academic perspective better (e.g. pressures of course delivery, research commitments) to find common ground. Bridging these differences is crucial because, as the literature indicates, when academic and administrative staff fail to connect, the institution's ability to serve students holistically is weakened (Gumport, 2019). Improved connection can translate into smoother referral of student issues, more coherent advice to students (since faculty and support speak with one voice), and quicker conflict resolution between departments.

One clear implication is the need for professional development programmes centred on effective communication and Maxwell's connecting principles. Since connecting is a learned skill rather than an innate talent (Hynes, 2021), universities could organise workshops or peer learning sessions on topics like active listening, empathy in communication, and collaborative problem-solving. For instance, a workshop might encourage academic and non-academic participants to role-play scenarios where miscommunication commonly occurs, then apply connecting techniques such as rephrasing the issue from the other's viewpoint or finding a shared objective in the scenario, to resolve them. Over time, such practice can build a culture where staff instinctively seek to connect, asking colleagues "How can I help?" or "What do we both want to achieve here?" rather than working at cross purposes. This cultural shift aligns with Maxwell's idea that focusing on others and common ground creates a positive environment for influence and teamwork. Notably, any training should be inclusive of both groups in the same room (physical or virtual), fostering mutual understanding and breaking down hierarchical or siloed mindsets.

*Implications for Counselling:* In the counselling and student support domain, the study's findings would reinforce that effective support is a team effort requiring strong communication channels (Kaneko, 2025). University Counsellors must communicate student needs or crises to academic personnel in a way that prompts empathy and action; likewise, academic advisors or tutors should feel comfortable reaching out to counselling services when a student's issue extends beyond academics. If this research shows that empathy-rich communication correlates with better collaborative outcomes, it provides evidence for counselling departments to advocate relational communication training across the institution. Essentially, it bolsters the argument that "soft skills" like empathy and active listening yield hard results, much as in therapy, where a foundation of trust and understanding leads to better client outcomes (Bourgault & Goforth, 2021), in education, a foundation of connection among staff leads to better student outcomes. Additionally, for counsellors specifically, the principles serve as a reminder that connecting with students may require going beyond the scripted advice, investing energy to show genuine care and ensuring communications, even via phone or email, convey warmth and understanding can significantly impact a student's comfort level in an ODDE setting where personal touch is harder to establish.

*Implications for Institutional Policy:* At an organisational level, the results can guide policy adjustments. For example, if “Connecting Requires Energy” is identified as a weak area due to high workloads, administrators might consider policies that allow for more frequent informal interactions, such as virtual “coffee break” meetings or cross-departmental retreats, to build relationships. The data might also justify the creation of formal communication liaison roles or committees that include both academic and administrative representatives, tasked with ensuring information is shared in an accessible, connected manner, reflecting Maxwell’s practice of keeping communication clear and simple to everyone. Moreover, evidence of positive outcomes from connecting behaviours could encourage leadership (Schaufeli, 2021) to include communication and teamwork competencies in performance evaluations or hiring criteria for both faculty and staff. If those who connect better are more effective in their jobs, then rewarding and cultivating those competencies becomes a strategic priority.

*Theoretical Implications:* This study would contribute to the growing body of research emphasising the human relationship aspect of educational communication. It integrates a business/leadership communication framework into an educational context, potentially validating that these principles have cross-domain relevance. A positive finding for Maxwell’s framework in academia could encourage further research, such as qualitative studies on how these principles play out in daily university life, or experimental studies (e.g. implementing a “connection intervention” in one department and observing outcomes). It also adds to social presence theory by extending the concept beyond student–student/instructor to staff–staff interactions, suggesting that social presence, that the sense of being connected and “seen” by colleagues, could be just as important for staff morale and effectiveness as it is for students’ learning.

In summary, the discussion indicates that fostering true connection is both feasible and beneficial. Investing effort in this area addresses the core problem that “everyone communicates, but few connect.” By turning the few into many through conscientious practice of connecting principles, ODDE institutions can expect not only a more harmonious workplace but also a stronger support system that enhances student success and satisfaction.

## **Conclusion**

This conceptual paper argues that communication in ODDE institutions should be examined as a relational process rather than a purely informational one. In universities where academic and non-academic staff must work across functional boundaries to support students, communication quality matters at the level of institutional practice. The issue is not whether communication occurs, but whether it builds enough understanding, attentiveness, and mutual regard to support coordinated action.

Maxwell’s connecting principles offer a useful organising lens for this inquiry. When placed alongside recent scholarship on internal communication, empathic communication, social presence, and cross-functional collaboration in higher education, the framework gains stronger academic relevance. The literature suggests that connection-oriented communication is likely to matter in environments where interaction is mediated, roles are differentiated, and student support depends on collaboration across units. Internal communication has been linked with engagement and institutional attachment in higher education, social presence has been linked with collaboration and reduced isolation in mediated interaction, and cross-functional work has

emerged as a significant feature of contemporary university practice (Nguyen & Ha, 2023; Kreijns et al., 2024; Kezar et al., 2025; Thorpe & Partridge, 2024).

The proposed framework and methodology give this study a clear empirical pathway. By examining differences between academic and non-academic staff, and by testing the links between connecting behaviours, communication effectiveness, and collaborative student support, the study can contribute to both scholarship and practice. At the scholarly level, it extends discussion of communication in digital higher education into staff-to-staff interaction, a domain that has received far less attention than student-facing communication. At the practical level, it may offer a basis for staff development, communication training, and cross-unit initiatives aimed at improving how universities respond to student needs.

In that sense, the contribution of this paper lies in reframing communication in ODDE as an institutional capability grounded in human connection. For digital universities, the capacity to connect across roles may be one of the conditions that allows systems, policies, and services to work as intended.

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