Thematic article

Migrating From Face-To-Face to Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Experiences of Psychology Students at a Private Higher Education Institution in Gauteng

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Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an accelerated migration from face-to-face to online learning. This article aims to explore and describe how psychology students experienced the migration from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It entailed a qualitative research design with an exploratory and descriptive approach. The participants were 28 psychology students from a Private Higher Education Institution in Gauteng, chosen through purposive sampling. An online survey method was employed to gather the needed information which was then subjected to a thematic analysis. It emerged that the challenges experienced by students were internet connectivity issues, insufficient computer literacy, reduced class time, anxiety, physical impact, and communication issues. Moreover, some benefits related to flexibility, the convenience of online studies, and safety from infection with COVID-19 were identified. It was also noted that having certain attributes such as independence, time management skills, having support, and being tech-savvy improved the online learning process. Some opportunities for Higher Education Institutions to improve the experiences of students included creativity in module delivery as well as providing guidelines on how to use these online platforms.

Keywords: migrating; online learning; COVID-19 pandemic; psychology students; South Africa

Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) caused an accelerated migration from face-to-face to online platforms at Higher Education Institutions. These institutions have had to develop new and innovative learning techniques to make this migration possible, and this was no exception in South Africa (Bao, 2020). The transition from face-to-face to online learning was challenging because creating a social presence on the online platform was difficult but was necessary (Esani, 2010; Naik et al., 2018). Online learning makes receiving course content easier, creates an opportunity for students to be less restricted by time and space with regards to their education, and it forces students to take more responsibility for their studies (Kemp et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2011). Online learning offers benefits such as interacting with other students, supporting other students who are also studying online and provide educational opportunities to students who are location-bound through internet connections (Coomey et al., 2001; Eldeeb, 2014; Houlden et al., 2019; Mayer, 2019; Passey, 2017). However, educators who are unfamiliar with online platforms tend to adopt a "one size fits all" approach,

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which can be ineffective and create gaps in education, as not all types of learners are always reached (Gillett et al., 2017). This migration presented many challenges, as some universities were not ready for the sudden transition to delivering module content using only online learning (Basilaia et al,, 2020; Sahu, 2020).

South Africa, as a developing country, encountered difficulties regarding resource provision for online learning due to the fact that over 30% of the South African population live in areas with limited to no internet access (Plecher, 2020). This creates even more challenges to obtaining a higher education qualification (Martinez et al., 2019; Timmis et al., 2018). Xu and Jaggars (2013) have identified gaps between online and face-to-face learning; more specifically, among less-advantaged populations (Xu et al., 2013).

Within the South African context, particularly within the Private Higher Education sector, there is little research that looks at the unprecedented shift from face-to-face to online learning modalities (Esani, 2010; Moorhouse, 2020).

Therefore, the overall aim of the study was to explore the experiences of psychology students at a Private Higher Education Institution in Gauteng with regards to the migration from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve the above-mentioned aim, the following objectives were undertaken:

1. Identify challenges presented by the migration from face-to-face to online learning, if any.
2. Explore the opportunities presented by online learning, if any.
3. Explore ways in which Higher Education Institutions can minimise the impact of online learning to students' achievements of learning outcomes.
4. Investigate ways in which Higher Education Institutions can maximise the opportunities of online learning to enhance students' achievements of learning outcomes.

Research design and Methods

Research Design

A qualitative, descriptive, and exploratory research approach was used to explore and describe the experiences of the participating Private Higher Education students (Holosko et al., 2011). These research designs were suitable for highlighting the challenges and benefits the students had experienced during the migration to online learning.

Sampling Procedure and Sample

Selecting a group from the population as representatives to participate in the study is known as sampling (Saldana, 2011). Non-probability sampling was used in this study; this type of sampling suggests that not every individual in the population has an equal opportunity of being chosen to participate in the study (Pascoe, 2014). Purposive sampling was used to find participants, this type of sampling was used because it deliberately chooses specific participants based on their qualities, (Etikan et al., 2015). The researcher needed to use Private Higher Education students who had undergone the migration to online learning, as they have the experiences the study aims to explore and there was limited research conducted with this target group. A total of 28 psychology students, at various levels of study, who are registered at a Private Higher Education Institution in Gauteng participated in the study.

Research Instrument

The instrument used to collect the data for this study was an Online Qualitative Survey, through Google Forms. The Online Qualitative Survey was used to gather demographic information from the participants and asked participants open-ended questions which aimed to highlight the experiences the students might share pertaining to the migration to online learning.

Procedure

The participants were sent a link through student services where they completed the online survey in Google Forms. The participants gave consent by clicking a box in the survey, anyone who did not give consent was eliminated. Students were given 7 days to complete the survey. After the 5th day, a reminder email was sent to students again via student services, and they were given the remaining 2 days to complete the survey. There was also a disqualifying question to make sure participants were over the age of 18 years old. Thereafter, the data was transcribed, and a thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Data Analysis

The steps for thematic analysis used to analyse the data were those posed by Braun and Clarke (2006). They described the thematic analysis as a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. The thematic analysis method allowed the researchers to see and identify collective experiences shared by the participants in the data sets (Braun et al., 2006).

Results

The study aimed to explore and describe how psychology students at a Private Higher Education Institution in Gauteng experienced the migration from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The table below presents the four main themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 1. Theme 1: Difficulties Experienced by Students

Subtheme	Description of Subtheme	Motivating Statement
1.1. Connectivity Issues	Connectivity issues and technological difficulties had made online studying difficult for participants due to limited infrastructure.	*"Data was a big issue. I had to upgrade my data plan to accommodate the extra data expenses"* (Participant 12). *"Just the fact that both my mother and myself use the WiFi for work, makes it a bit difficult"* (Participant 15). *"It's beyond my control, as connectivity is unpredictable dependent on the place where I am at time of connecting"* (Participant 17).
1.2. Lack of Computer Literacy	The inability to use technology or even being overwhelmed by new technological tools hindered participants from successfully participating in the online learning environment.	*"I felt overwhelmed by the skills I had to learn and the platforms I had to familiarize myself with"* (Participant 12). *"It is very easy to feel defeated when something doesn't work for you which can often happen when working with technology"* (Participant 15). *"It's a lot more difficult due to technical adjustments and the shift in how it felt to be at campus to just sitting at home and looking at my screen"* (Participant 18).
1.3. Reduced Class Time	Class times became shorter (decreased from three hours to 90 minutes), which resulted in not having enough time to cover all the module content in depth and participants did not grasp the content as effectively.	*"We really don't get enough time to learn from our classmates"* (Participant 20). *"I feel like I'm not getting the full extent of the knowledge as we crush it all into an hour and a half versus the old 6threehours."* (Participant 26).
1.4. Anxiety	Participants felt anxious, overwhelmed and uncertain about the future when they heard about the migration to online learning.	*"To be honest, I was very anxious. I'm not that comfortable talking to others through video or phone calls, so finding out we would be doing classes through Zoom was very stressful…All in all, I was just anxious because of how unusual it was, how everything would work"* (Participant 26). *"I was not sure whether I'll be able to cope or not"* (Participant 20). *"Anxious more than I already was"* (Participant 7).

| 1.5. Physical Impact | Participants stated that online learning was more physically exhausting (because there was an increase in screen time) when compared to face-to-face learning. | *"After using zoom, I am exhausted"* (Participant 1).
"Irritated eyes and not moving around. I'm now using eye drops because I spend too much time in front of my computer...With online learning, I feel more exhausted. My back is sore and my eyes are irritated" (Participant 12).
"With online classes I'm forced to always be on a device most of the time. It's exhausting" (Participant 27). |
| 1.6. Communication Issues | Participants experienced challenges with regards to communicating with fellow peers and educators. The challenges ranged from interrupted communication, delays in communications and miscommunication. | *"The interaction is not always effective as we miss out on non-verbal ways of communicating and that often causes misunderstandings"* (Participant 16).
"Communication has decreased and feels less sincere. I have met with a few classmates but it's difficult to build on friendships online…Communication with lecturers is okay as communication was usually on email prior to covid-19. But it's a challenge not getting immediate clarification as you would in class." (Participant 24).
"We cannot build proper relationships with our lectures, which others wish they had with us because of the energy we give off over the zoom classes, so this is a sad story". (Participant 9). |

Table 2. Theme 2: Benefits of Online Learning

Subtheme	Description of Subtheme	Motivating Statement
2.1. Convenience	Convenience was highlighted as a benefit because participants now had more time due to the lack of travel time to campus.	*"Sometimes I might not be fit to travel to school maybe because of illnesses e.g stomach bug, so in that case an online class would do justice"* (Participant 9). *"I also live far from campus, so overall, the online learning has saved me about 3 to 4 hours of time per class which I can now dedicate to other things"* (Participant 25). *"The time spent moving from campus to home isn't there anymore. So, I feel like I have more time to work"* (Participant 27).
2.2. Flexibility	Flexibility was a positive aspect of online learning because it gave participants the opportunity to choose how they spent their time.	*"I have more time to focus on assessments. I get to rest more"* (Participant 10). *"I have more free time to dedicate to assignments or other non-academic activities…I get to do the work at my own pace and in my own time more so because I have more time"* (Participant 25). *"I've had a lot more time to work on assessments. I live quite far from campus, and the travel, as well as the shortened classes, have given me much more time for both my work and myself"* (Participant 26).
2.3. Safety from COVID-19	Studying at home in a safe environment is a benefit because participants had a reduced risk of contracting COVID-19.	*"I felt safe in knowing that with online classes, I won't suffer any risks of infection"* (Participant 18). *"...being able to be in a safe environment during COVID-19"* (Participant 4).
2.4. Improves Technological Competence	Online learning gave participants the opportunity to improve their technological skills because they were spending more time on digital devices.	*"I got to learn how to use a PC better than I was able to"* (Participant 16). *"Technically inclined. I have gotten better at relying on my devices and managing assessments as well as with using the [Private Higher Education Institution's] site"* (Participant 18).

Table 3. Theme 3: Attributes That Make Online Learning Easier

Subtheme	Description of Subtheme	Motivating Statement
3.1. Independence	Independence assisted participants in the migration to online learning because they were able to work on their own successfully.	*I get to do the work at my own pace and in my own time more so because I have more time… I prefer to work on my own. I am more efficient when I work independently"* (Participant 25). *"I am a person who likes to learn and see for myself and when I fail, I learn more from my own mistakes"* (Participant 20).
3.2. Time Management	Participants stated that their time management skills improved with online learning and that this helped them plan more effectively and be responsible for doing their work.	*It forced me to become more responsible and made me realise how important it was to manage time"* (Participant 15). *"Maintaining my working times on a daily basis"* (Participant 2). *"I can't manage how much time to spend doing what so that all my modules are up to par with the deadlines e.g forums and assessments"* (Participant 14).
3.3. Support	Participants highlighted that having a good support system was one of the benefits that they had experienced during the online learning process. This support system made the transition easier.	*"Support: got constant support from friends and family. I learnt how to cope and to be able to focus for longer"* (Participant 1). *"Mental health support- we would get emails and support from lectures on how can we take care of ourselves"* (Participant 5).

Table 4. Theme 4: Ways to Improve Online Learning

Subtheme	Description of Subtheme	Motivating Statement
4.1. Creativity with Module Content	Changing class participation methods could help online learning be more beneficial if more creative ways of teaching are adopted by Private Higher Education Institutions.	*"Incorporate 21st century stuff…Create games, puzzles, contests of information, scenarios…* *"Consider swapping prescribed readings or even recommended readings for Videos"* (Participant 23). *"Find a different method to do class participation as it gets overwhelming to do many forums"* (Participant 24). *"Having more creative aspects, helps me remember things rather than just looking at a screen… more activities that are fun"* (Participant 22).
4.2. Provide Guidelines on the Use of Online Learning Platforms	Private Higher Education Institutions could provide students with a clear direction on how to use online platforms to make studying online more user-friendly.	*"[the private higher education institution] could try to improve some of the features on the site to be more user friendly"* (Participant 18). *"Provision of step-by-step instructions on how to use the platforms [might be useful] ... Zoom and the discussion forums are good and productive but I still struggle with understanding how to use the voice-threads"* (Participant 16). *"…just the inexperience in using the online platform, which meant I felt quite overwhelmed and lost which didn't help when it came to assignments"* (Participant 15).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the migration from face-to-face to online learning, which presented many challenges, albeit some opportunities have been noted. Therefore, this study aimed to describe how psychology students at a Private Higher Education Institution in Gauteng experienced the migration from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants stated that access to WIFI, unreliable and unpredictable connectivity made online studying difficult as a result of online platforms failing because of limited infrastructure. Literature suggests that limited infrastructure is one of the biggest challenges when it comes to online learning, as well as the constrained network coverage in remote areas, especially in South Africa (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, students who live in constrained network areas could find it more problematic to obtain a higher education compared to those in high coverage areas.

Some participants stated that the inability to use technology or being overwhelmed by new technological tools hindered them from successfully participating in the online learning environment and resulted in demotivation and frustration. Several researchers report that insufficient computer skills impact online learning negatively for students (Chang et al., 2016; Dzakiria, 2012; Kara et al., 2019; Nor, 2011). It is reported that

students with higher computer and internet self-efficacy perform better in online learning (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

The decrease to approximately half the class time resulted in not having enough time to cover all the module content in-depth or effectively and participants also felt that there was not enough time to learn from classmates compared to face-to-face class time. Similarly, van de Vord and Pogue (2012) found that less time is spent teaching online than face-to-face, resulting in less time spent with educators. Kebritchi et al. (2017) reported on a study that found longer interaction with module content and educators meant better student performance. Reardon et al. (2008) reported that regardless of the mode of learning, shorter classes lead to fewer student discussions and in-depth conversations about the content; therefore, students feel that they do not learn as much in shorter classes.

A majority of the participants stated that the uncertainty of the migration and using new online tools caused immense anxiety. Galea et al. (2020) indicated that students felt frustration along with anxiety, particularly when faced with technological challenges, connectivity issues, and online learning during the lockdown. However, the increase in anxiety could have also been due to the context and environment that they have been learning in (i.e. COVID-19 pandemic).

Participants expressed that online learning was more physically exhausting because they were not used to spending so much time on digital devices. The current study has similar findings to Mehdi (2020), who highlighted similar physical impacts that online learning has on an individual's physical well-being. The findings are also confirmed by Queiros and de Villiers (2016), who reported the discomfort resulting from spending extensive periods on digital devices as a disadvantage of online learning. Zhang et al. (2020) urge students to maintain a balance between work and rest so their eyes can be protected from overexposure to the screen.

Participants experienced delays in communication, as well as miscommunication when communicating with fellow peers and educators. The lack of non-verbal cues during online learning created a disconnection between peers because non-verbal cues were lacking, which resulted in ineffective communication and hindered relationship-building between students. Betts (2009) stated that the lack of non-verbal cues creates misinterpretation between the sender (lecturer/educator) and receiver (student). In addition to communication with peers, students felt that their communication with educators was not as effective as face-to-face learning. Due to the delays in communications, some educators' feedback and responses were not timely and they were often difficult to reach, which could have been amplified by the pandemic. The findings are consistent with those of Çakiroğlu (2014), Kebritchi et al. (2017), and Mbati (2012), who found that a lack of timely feedback from educators led to student anxiety and less engagement and hindered students' learning.

The participants elaborated that the less time spent on campus, as well as less travelling time, gave them flexibility and therefore the opportunity to choose how they spent their time. Kara et al. (2019) stated that online learning increases access to education due to its flexible nature that allows for personal planning of how time will be spent. This is important for students who study and work at the same time. In addition, Nambiar (2020) found that individuals get to study from the comfort of their own homes and thus save time not traveling.

A few participants elaborated that because they were studying at home in a safe environment, they had a reduced risk of contracting COVID-19. Notably, Dung (2020) confirms that an advantage of online learning is the protection during the COVID-19 pandemic of the individual's health and the community's safety.

Online learning gave participants the opportunity to improve their technology skills because they were spending more time on digital devices, which made online learning easier. Dung (2020) reported that online learning created the opportunity for lecturers and students to develop their technological skills. Queiros and de Villiers (2016) further stated that online learning enhanced computing and internet skills.

Some students reported that independence assisted them in being successful during the migration. To confirm the benefits of online learning, some participants even stated that since online learning started, they had become more independent learners than before. A study by Boulton (2008), asserts that being independent and taking responsibility for your own learning are skills that are deemed necessary to online learning. Kebritchi et al. (2017) argue that students tend to perform better when they are given more control over their own learning.

Participants stated that their time management skills improved with online learning and that this helped them to be successful in the migration. On the contrary, a few stated that they could not manage their time very well and that building their time management skills would be beneficial. This finding is supported by Broadbent and Poon (2015) who state that students who struggle with self-management and time management find online learning challenging. Moore and Pearson (2017) add that training students in certain soft skills like time management can assist in alleviating anxiety.

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Participants highlighted that having a good support system (at university and at home) was one of the benefits that they experienced during the online learning process and that this support helped them to be successful with their migration. A finding in a study by Roddy et al. (2017) stated that student support is important, as a lack of support services can pose a significant barrier to student engagement in online learning.

Participants expressed that Private Higher Education Institutions could incorporate more creative ways of teaching; more specifically, reduce the number of forum discussions and use more activities that are fun to complete. In support, Barai (2020) asserts that using creative aspects like the use of photos, charts during class, giving students online projects, and not book-based objective question-answer projects kept them more engaged.

Some participants commented that the platform which students used when studying online could be more user-friendly, and the Private Higher Education Institutions could provide students with a clear direction on how to use online platforms. Similarly, the research findings indicated that the lack of the ability to adapt to using the various platforms and technology was a skill that hindered the online learning process. In an online environment, providing so many different platforms and tools to learn and interact with makes it hard for individuals more specifically adults who struggle with using computers (Kara et al., 2019). Boulton (2008) found that the ability to adapt to the online learning environment is the skill required for a positive outcome. Gillett-Swan (2017) argues that online learning provides institutions with an adaptable environment that provides students with the ability to play a larger role in how the learning space can be designed.

Limitations

Although the research contributed to the body of knowledge regarding the experiences of Private Higher Education Psychology students with the migration from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research study did not go unhindered by some limitations such as small sample size and method of data collection. As such, the findings cannot be generalised to the overall population of Private Higher Education Psychology students in Gauteng and elsewhere. Future studies could be conducted from a variety of higher education institutions, focusing on a broad category of students from both private and public educational institutions, that have been affected by the pandemic. This attempt could highlight the overall experiences of primary, secondary, high school, and university students from across South Africa. Additionally, future studies could consider using other data collection methods such as photovoice, focus groups, or interviews.

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