Facilitating Lifelong Learning for Mature Part-time Students: Findings from South Africa and Norway

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Abstract: When the COVID-19 pandemic spread, governments worldwide ordered most of the population to stay at home. From one day to the other all lecturing in higher education institutions (HEIs) had to be online. For many this resulted in solitude and isolation, something that in turn ad an effect on students' well-being and academic achievements. The situation was somewhat different for mature part-time students (MPTS). They had struggled with being able to attend classes (at a campus), sometimes feeling alienated and left "on their own". During the pandemic, they were able to attend more lectures as they were offered online.

After the pandemic, most courses were offered as a hybrid version; they could return to campus or follow the courses online. Some students returned to campus, but not as many as one hoped. Hence, the student well-being and the academic achievements did not improve as much as hoped and expected.

There have been several discourses regarding "forcing" students back to campus in order to improve the students' situation and to regain the personal contact with the students. However, for one growing group of students, the MPTS', the hybridity is what has brought them closer to the campus. For these students, the academic achievements have not deteriorated nor their well-being. In fact, investigations show that the hybrid education enables a life-long education situation.

In this paper we present investigations from two universities from two very different parts of the world; The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway and Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. Our joint research has focussed on looking at how hybridity can be adapted in order to better facilitate for the MPTS to maintain in a life-ling learning situation supporting academic success and ensuring retention, as this group is now no longer in a home office, but back in a work-life.

Keywords: Hybrid Education, Facilitating Life-Long Learning, Work-Life Balance, Work-Education Balance

1. Introduction

Lifelong learning, primarily propelled by rapidly evolving technology and shifting job markets, has emerged as an essential component in maintaining a resilient workforce (Field, 2000; OECD., 2016). The present literature review aims to navigate through this complex landscape, exploring how technology, particularly Learning Management Systems (LMS), are shaping lifelong learning experiences, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on these experiences, the challenges and opportunities of self-regulated online courses, and the role of motivation in successful learning outcomes.

Role of Technology in Lifelong Learning

The advent of technology in education has brought forth a new dawn for lifelong learners. Learning Management Systems (LMS) have provided a platform to distribute a plethora of learning materials—articles, videos, quizzes, podcasts, external links—making education more accessible to those juggling work and family commitments (Bradley, 2021). The "flipped classroom" model has demonstrated an enhancement in course outcomes, enabling students to participate in active learning at their convenience, as opposed to being confined to specific times (Bishop and Verleger, 2013; Venemyr et al., 2017; Vold, 2014).

Impact of COVID-19 on Lifelong Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges into academia, compelling educators and students alike to adapt swiftly to digital platforms for instruction and examination. While this sudden shift was built upon a foundation of at least three decades of online and blended learning practices, it also spotlighted the inherent problems with such modalities. Concepts like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) gained traction during this period (Carbonnier, 2014; Margaryan, Bianco, and Littlejohn, 2015; Littlejohn et al., 2016),

yet the crisis exacerbated the balancing act many students struggled with, blurring boundaries between work, home, and study (Bergum, Peters, and Vold, 2023).

Challenges and Opportunities of Self-Regulated Online Courses

Despite the opportunities online education affords, the self-regulation required for MOOCS poses a significant hurdle for many students, especially those with demanding work-life balance and family obligations (Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan, 2017; Ryan and Deci, 2017; Littlejohn et al., 2016). The need to prioritize work over studies becomes particularly acute during stressful periods (Boltz et al., 2021). Still, the flexibility offered by online education has been shown to be valuable, particularly when coupled with face-to-face interactions that enhance the learning experience (Tseng and Walsh Jr, 2016).

Teacher's Motivation and Abilities for Online/Hybrid Education

The successful delivery of online education is also contingent on educators' motivation and competence with digital platforms. During the pandemic, many teachers reported feeling demotivated by the impersonal nature of digital interactions (Han and Yin, 2016; Vold and Ranglund, 2019; Vold, Lervik, and Holen, 2021). Consequently, the role of educators' motivation in online education delivery warrants further investigation.

The rapid transition to digital learning platforms, catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has underscored the importance of lifelong learning in today's ever-evolving technological landscape. While online education has made learning more accessible for many, it comes with its own unique set of challenges that require further exploration to ensure the best learning outcomes for all students.

1.1 Our joint study

At last year's European Conference on e-Learning (ECEL), we noticed that our presentations had similar approaches and similar results. This inspired us to dig deeper into the data and look at the data again to compare similarities and differences. Being from two very different parts of the world with potentially different issues regarding education, triggered our interest to compare our data.

Hence, in this paper we compare two studies; one from Nelson Mandela University, South Africa (here after called NMU) (Lourens et al., 2022) and one from The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway (hereafter called INN) (Lervik, Vold, and Holen, 2022). Both studies enlist adult students in a work-life; mature part-time students.

At both NMU and INN we use an LMS where all the course material is available. At the NMU Moodle is used, and at INN the LMS called Canvas is used.

Our main objectives for this paper have been to look at similarities and differences within the student groups. Both our investigations were about their preferences regarding attending education digitally and/or physically regarding work-life balance, how they handle work-education balance and other issues regarding attending education physically and/or digitally.

2. Methodology

In the study from NMU, a questionnaire was used to collect the data, and in the study from INN a mixed methods approach was used (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The data from South Africa was interpreted qualitatively as well as the quantitative data from Norway. The interviews (from Norway) were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide (Dalen, 2011; Jacobsen, 2015). Originally the study from Norway was treated as a case study (Yin, 2014) and the data are from two cohorts; one from 2021 and one from 2022.

2.1 Data collection instrument

The principal data collection instrument for our study was an online questionnaire administered to the NMU cohort. This tool was designed to garner insight into students' experiences with and perceptions of online learning, particularly in the context of the changes spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaire primarily employed 5-point Likert scale questions, enabling us to capture the nuanced variations in students' responses.

A selection of the key questions in the questionnaire are as follows:

- "In general, I find online learning different to face-to-face learning in a way that suits me and my learning style." This question aimed to probe the degree to which online learning matches individual students' preferred learning styles.
- "I enjoy the type of learning used during the COVID-19 pandemic." This question provided insights into students' levels of satisfaction with the shift to online learning during the pandemic.
- "In general, the current type of learning and teaching allows me to work at a pace that is suitable for me." This question helped us gauge whether students felt the online learning pace met their individual learning needs.
- "I know and remember more about each module topic after completing each study unit online." By posing this question, we aimed to understand whether online learning enhanced students' knowledge retention.
- "I learn more about the topics when I complete an online session than what I would learn in a face-to-face class." This question allowed us to measure students' perceptions of the effectiveness of online learning compared to traditional face-to-face classes.
- "Do you experience any differences in the contact with the lecturer in digital lecturing compared with the face-to-face lectures?" This question was to reveal how the students experienced the online medium compared to the face-to-face lecturing.

The responses to these questions provided valuable insights into the students' online learning experiences, informing our understanding of the benefits and challenges inherent in this mode of education.

3. Results and discussion

Here we will present the different results from our investigations. We will present them based on our joint agreed focus areas; preferences on online and/or physical attendance regarding work-life balance, work-education balance and issues hybridity regarding education.

3.1 Preferences regarding work-life balance

The responses from NMU show that the students prefer the flexibility of a hybrid alternative. This allows them to focus better on their own time, rather than having to always meet physically at a class. Only one student (of 11) reply negatively regarding work-life balance.

At the INN, the additional answers show that the travelling time, small (and sometimes sick) children, old (and sometimes sick) parents or other relatives that needs attention, is a part of the bigger picture regarding work-life balance. By reducing travelling time and time away from family (such as travelling time and the time at school), they obtain a better work-life balance as well. Also, some of the students at INN does not get the time off for formal education, hence, they have to draw on their days off designated to holidays to attend. Some of the students at INN also report on being able to stay at work whilst taking part in online seminars.

Both the NMU and INN students responds positively regarding the material provided in the LMS. At both NMU and INN the students claim that the LMS is easy to use and that the provided course material is helping them in their studies not only by its nature, but because it is available online at all times.

This is in line with the findings in the theory. The availability of material allows for a more flexible approach as they can access it several times and at the times that they have available (Bishop and Verleger, 2013).

3.2 Work-education balance

Both regarding the suitability of pace, effectiveness and perception of knowledge transfer, most of the students reply positively from both universities. However, in the data from INN we register that some of the students are working at the same time as studying (or vice versa). At INN, lectures are recorded as streaming video, in addition to a hybrid version where students may attend physically or online. This they report as being distraction and that they are not concentrating well on either. Also, due to them being at their work, they are unable to take part in groupwork or group discussions. In the NMU, this is not listed as an issue in the paper. However, this does not mean that this does not happen. Indeed, if someone needs to leave education as they are too busy with work, indicate that the students may have a heavy workload.

The findings may indicate a number of issues regarding work-education balance. It may be that the students are not given the time off to take part in the physical or online lectures. It may also be that the students do not themselves prioritize to focus only on the online lecturing.

Either way, the students that are at work when studying may miss out on taking a more active part in the lectures, and they definitely miss out on the social learning aspects.

These are interesting findings as we have not come across a lot of studies that refer to a simultaneous focus on work and study. Hence, this is a topic to study further.

3.3 Hybrid education

Both at NMU and at INN the students are clear about how the opportunities for hybrid education is crucial for many students as they would have been unable to attend all classes physically, mainly due to issues mentioned above.

3.3.1 *Issues regarding physically and/or digital attendance*

At the NMU, travelling during wintertime is listed as an issue. Providing online lecturing that they can take part in at home without travelling, would thus solve a problem.

At INN, the students attending online sometimes feel "left out" and not payed attention to. Even if the students have been encouraged to attend physically as it is hard to cater for both present and online students, they seem to compare the present to the times of COVID-19 pandemic where we were only working online and all the attention was on the students that were on "the other side" of the line.

However, many of the students prefer to have lectures online (16 out of 20 respondents). 10 out of 19 prefer to have the choice of taking part online or face-to-face.

Here it may also be about the teachers' motivation and abilities of catering for both student groups (physically present and online) (Finsterwald *et al.*, 2013; Han and Yin, 2016; Vold, Lervik and Holen, 2021). It the teachers are not provided with adequate equipment nor with sufficient education on how to cater for hybrid education, it may seem as a daunting task for the teachers and as less useful to the students. Compared to the COVID-19 pandemic setting, the online students in a hybrid version of lecturing, will not have the same closeness and receive the immediate response from the teachers as the ones physically present at the lectures, as the technology will delay any responses to what is presented in the lectures.

4. Conclusion

What we have found in our joint study, is that students in a lifelong learning situation, seem to struggle with many of the same things. They prefer to have the flexibility of a hybrid version. This will allow them to attend physically if they have the time off, are able to travel due to distances, economy, family situations, etc., as this is rated highest regarding learning outcome. It will also allow them to participate online if any of the listed reasons should prevent them from travelling to attend the physical lecture. The students recognize the positive in the options but would yet like to have a fully online version in the "pandemic way" when they cannot attend physically. Sometimes this is due to teachers lack of motivation and/or capabilities regarding hybrid versions of education. There is also an issue with the work-life balance, as many students are attending education to either keep a job, or to be able to change jobs. The workload on many of the students are reported as high. This may lead to issues such as a work-education imbalance, sometimes resulting in having to work simultaneous to attending lectures. This is perceived as stressful and deprives the students of the few options of social learning opportunities that the online versions are offering. Although far apart, the students at both NMU and INN seems to be facing and struggling with many of the same problems.

The conclusions drawn from this study are nonetheless constrained by certain limitations, notably the constraints set by the original ethical clearance on the extent of statistical analyses that could be performed. While the analyses we conducted provided valuable insights, a more sophisticated and advanced statistical approach could potentially offer a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics at play. Due to ethical considerations, such advanced analyses were not feasible in the context of this study. However, recognising this limitation, we plan to apply for an amendment to our ethical approval to facilitate more advanced statistical investigations in future research.

Despite this, the similarities in the struggles faced by lifelong learners at both NMU and INN underscore the universality of the issues and challenges identified. Moving forward, this recognition can inform interventions and strategies that cater to the unique needs and preferences of this student demographic, regardless of their geographical location. Flexibility in learning modalities—whether hybrid or fully online—will be crucial, as will be the consideration of factors like work-life balance and the pressures of simultaneously juggling work, education, and family commitments. This understanding will continue to guide our ongoing research and efforts to support lifelong learners in achieving their educational goals.

4.1 Future research

There seems to be lacking investigations into the issue of simultaneously having to work whilst taking part in lectures, which leads to a more passive role in the online part of the class. What does this do to the learning outcome? Are there other options that technology would provide for? What would it take to make the students focus on education for the duration of the online lecturing?

Also, this study has mainly focussed on the students replies. It would be interesting to see if there are similar perceptions amongst the lecturers. How are they coping with the hybridity? How are they upgraded and supported in order to handle hybrid lecturing? Are there other ways to utilize the technologies in better ways to support not only the learners/students, but also the teaching faculty staff? These are questions that require further investigations.

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