Exploring the New Normal: A Qualitative Study on Student Engagement, Technology Access, and the Experience of Online Learning in Post-pandemic College Education

Edgar R. Eslit, St. Michael's College, Philippines

Abstract

This study digs into the evolving field of higher education, particularly in the wake of a significant transition to online learning triggered by the global pandemic. Employing qualitative research methods, it incorporates comprehensive literature reviews, informal stakeholder interviews, and observational analysis of the virtual learning environment. The research aims to unearth nuanced insights into various facets such as student engagement, technology accessibility, and the overall online learning experience in the post-pandemic educational milieu. The findings underscore the imperative of innovative strategies, emphasizing the need to prioritize student well-being, enhance accessibility, and maintain learning quality in the digital era. As the higher education sector grapples with the challenges of adapting to this new normal, the study makes a significant contribution to ongoing dialogues by providing a foundation for substantive discussions on the future direction of college education. The methodology includes a rigorous analysis of existing literature, stakeholder interviews, and observational techniques for qualitative data collection. The results underscore the need for adaptive strategies to create a conducive online learning environment, highlighting the crucial role of technology in shaping student experiences. Moreover, the study stresses the urgent need for proactive measures to address the diverse challenges in the post-pandemic higher education landscape. Overall, the study serves as a comprehensive guide for institutions and practitioners striving to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of online learning in the current educational paradigm. This is a compelling narrative of the educational sector's resilience and adaptability, thriving and innovating even in these unprecedented times.

Keywords: New Normal, Online Learning, Philippines, Post-pandemic, St. Michael's College, Student Engagement

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed the operation of higher education, leading to a notable shift in teaching and learning methods. Colleges and universities worldwide have faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic, resulting in substantial changes in education. This study aimed to investigate this "new normal" which has impacted educational institutions globally. The researcher sought to understand the various aspects of this educational transformation, specifically focusing on student engagement, technology access, and the experience of online learning. This study explores qualitative variables that characterize the academic journey of college students in the post-pandemic era at St. Michael's College, Iligan City, Philippines during the 2nd semester of A.Y. 2022-2023.

The paper not only reflects a change in the mode of education but also a broader societal and technological transformation defining the current landscape.

A. New Normal: Indicates the shift from traditional classroom-based instruction to predominantly online methods, highlighting the lasting impact of the pandemic on education.

B. Student Engagement: Examines the complex interaction of students with the educational process in an online environment, considering factors influencing motivation, commitment, and involvement (Alexander, 2020).

C. Technology access: The knowledge that online education relies on digital tools and infrastructure available to students, recognizing the varied impact on their learning experiences (Dede & Richards, 2020).

D. Experience of online learning: Explore the subjective experiences of students navigating the online educational landscape, including challenges, opportunities, and emotions shaping their learning journey (Nichols, 2020).

Through this exploration, this paper aims to provide insights and a deeper understanding of the ongoing educational transformation while identifying potential areas for improvement and adaptation. This inquiry is situated within the broader context of higher education scholarship, which has seen increased research addressing the challenges and innovations brought about by the digital transformation of learning (Ulum 2022).

This study also contributes to the broader discourse on educational innovation. The researcher draws on insights from scholars who have explored the evolving landscape of higher education in the digital age, recognizing the study's role in ongoing discussions about the future of learning (Alexander, 2020; Dede & Richards, 2020; Nichols, 2020).

This research anchors on three influential theories that have significantly shaped education discourse:
1) Social Cognitive Theory (Albert Bandura, 1986): This theory suggests that individuals learn by observing others and modeling their behavior. In the context of online education, it helps to explore how peer interactions and role modeling influence student engagement and learning outcomes.
2) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989): Focusing on factors influencing the adoption and use of technology, this model is integrated to examine

how technology access and perceived ease of use impact students' engagement in online learning.
3) Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000): Emphasizing cognitive, social, and teaching presence in online learning environments, this framework guides the investigation of students' online learning experiences by examining the roles of instructors, peers, and the cognitive processes involved.

The goal of this study was to examine the effects of online learning on student engagement, technology access, and the overall experience of college education at the College of Arts and Sciences. Michael's College in Iligan City, Philippines. To accomplish this, the study formulated the following research question:
1) How does the transition to online learning affect the level of student engagement among college students at SMC?
2) What is the current status of technology access among the selected college students at SMC and how does it influence their experience of online learning?
3) What unique experiences and challenges do students encounter in different programs (Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, Bachelor of Arts in English Language, and Bachelor of Science in Psychology) in the context of online learning at SMC?
4) What are the perceptions and attitudes of students toward online learning in a post-pandemic education setting and how do these attitudes shape their overall learning experience?
5) What strategies and recommendations can be derived from the findings to enhance the quality of online education at SMC, contributing to the broader discourse on the future of higher education in the digital age?

These research questions form the foundational framework for the study, guiding the exploration of various aspects related to the transition to online learning at SMC. This study was conducted during the first semester of 2023.

St. Michael's College is situated in Iligan City, Philippines, and celebrated for its rich cultural heritage and diverse educational institutions. The college offers a broad spectrum of academic programs, including the Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, Bachelor of Arts in English Language, and Bachelor of Science in Psychology, which are the focal points of this study. Managed by the Religious Virgin Mary (RVM) and PAASCU accredited, the college caters to basic education, college, and graduate studies (smciligan.edu.ph). Understanding the local context is crucial to provide a backdrop against which the study's findings and recommendations can be applied.

The significance of this study is twofold. First, it is important for school administrators, offering insights into the effectiveness of the transition to online learning at SMC makes informed decisions regarding the future of online education at the institution. Second, teachers and educators can benefit from the findings, as they can adapt their teaching methods to better suit the needs of students engaged in online learning. The study is also significant for the students themselves, as it provides a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with online education, empowers them to make informed choices, and enhances their learning experiences. Results are expected to present nuanced aspect of their engagement, technology access, program-specific challenges, attitudes, and practical recommendations.

Methodology

This study made use of a qualitative research method to emphasize the validity and reliability of the research process. The methodology included an in-depth literature review, informal interviews, observations, and thematic analysis. These approaches played a crucial role in investigating the "New Normal," student engagement, technology access, and the experience of online learning in the context of post-pandemic college education. It was chosen to offer a profound understanding of the subject matter and provide rich insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of randomly selected CAS students (Braun & Báez, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Ensuring the validity and reliability of the research methods is of paramount importance. An extensive literature review was conducted to establish the foundation of the study, create a theoretical framework, and ensure the credibility of the research (Snyder 2019; Cardoso Ermel et al. 2021).

Data Collection

This study made us of twenty (20) college students randomly selected from the College of Arts and Sciences at St. Michael's College, identified as "S-Part 1" to "S-Part 20" during the 2nd semester of A.Y. 2022-2023. This systematic participant selection approach was employed to ensure data saturation and to capture a diverse range of experiences (Mwita, 2022; Mthuli, Ruffin, & Singh, 2022).

The data collection involved an in-depth literature review, informal interviews, and observations. During the informal interviews, the participants were presented with open-ended questions, allowing them to freely express their experiences and perceptions. Observations were conducted in virtual learning environments to capture the dynamics of online classes and student behavior (Swain & Zachery, 2020; Ciesielska, Boström, & Öhlander, 2018; Chigbu, Atiku, & Du Plessis, 2023).

Data Analysis

Participants were asked to answer five qualitative questions, followed by informal interviews. This was followed by observations. Likewise, thematic analysis was employed to identify deeper meanings of the gathered data. This approach ensured rigorous analysis and grounded the findings in the experiences and perceptions of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). A systematic random approach to participant selection and the use of established research methods ensured the validity and reliability of the study (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018; Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

Ethical Considerations

To protect the rights of the participants, enhance validity, and uphold scientific or academic integrity, the researcher ensured that the participation was voluntary and informed, the identities and data were anonymous and confidential, the harm was minimized and avoided, and the results were communicated and discussed.

Approach to Literature Selection

The literature for this study was meticulously chosen to align with the qualitative research methodology, ensuring a deep exploration of the nuanced experiences of students in the post-pandemic educational landscape (OECD's, 2021). The criteria for selection were multi-faceted, prioritizing works that offer rich, qualitative insights into student engagement and the efficacy of technology in online learning environments.

Criteria for Inclusion

1. Topical Relevance: Literature was selected based on its focus on student engagement and online learning, particularly in the context of the challenges and adaptations necessitated by the pandemic.
2. Methodological Alignment: Preference was given to studies employing qualitative methods, resonating with the article's approach to capturing lived experiences.
3. Theoretical Contribution: Works that contribute to or challenge existing theories on technology-mediated education were included to provide a robust theoretical framework.
4. Diversity of Perspectives: A spectrum of literature was reviewed to encompass a broad range of student experiences, including different socioeconomic backgrounds and access to technology.
5. Recency: Given the rapidly evolving nature of online education, recent publications post-pandemic were prioritized to reflect the current state of affairs.

Sources and Volume of Literature

The sources comprised peer-reviewed academic journals, conference proceedings, and authoritative reports from educational bodies. The literature review was extensive but curated, aimed at achieving saturation without being redundant. While the exact number of sources is not specified, the term "comprehensive" suggests a significant volume of literature was considered to ensure a thorough understanding of the "New Normal" in higher education (Creswell & Báez, 2020). The literature selected paints a vivid picture of a higher education sector in flux, grappling with the sudden shift to online learning. It highlights the resilience and adaptability of institutions and students alike, navigating uncharted waters with varying degrees of success. The chosen literature underscores the importance of student engagement as a barometer for the effectiveness of online learning, while also spotlighting the digital divide that can hinder equitable access to education (Resources from the Online Learning Consortium (n.d.). Through this carefully curated body of work, the study aims to contribute meaningfully to the discourse on optimizing online learning in the post-pandemic era, ensuring it is inclusive, engaging, and educationally sound (Nichols, 2020).

Findings

This section presents the research outcomes pertaining to each research question. Summarized responses to the five research questions are presented, supported by insights gathered from interviews with the twenty participants ("S-Part 1" to "S-Part 20").

A. Summarized Answers to the Five Research Questions

Q 1: On the transition to online learning affect the level of student engagement among college students. Result: The transition to online learning had a significant impact on student engagement at St. Michael's College (Online Learning Consortium, n.d.). Several participants reported increased engagement owing to the flexibility offered by online classes. For example, "S-Part 6" stated, "I feel more engaged because I can attend classes from anywhere". The same finding was highlighted in a 2021 study by Barrot et al. However, there are notable challenges. "S-Part 12" mentioned, "I find it hard to stay focused with so many distractions at home." This idea was also proposed in a study by Fabriz et al. in 2021. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that the flexible nature of online learning can both enhance and hinder student engagement (Stewart, 2021).

Q 2: On the current status of technology access among the selected college students and how does it influence their experience of online learning. Result: Technology access plays a critical role in shaping the online learning experience of students at St. Michael's College. The same observation surface was used by Alhammadi in 2021. Participants with reliable access to devices and a stable Internet connection generally found online learning more accessible and effective. In contrast, students like "S-Part 14" faced challenges due to poor Internet connectivity in their area, which impacted their learning experience (Cheong et al., 2021). These findings align with existing research highlighting the disparities in technology access and their implications for learning outcomes (Barrot et al., 2021).

Q 3: On the unique experiences and challenges encountered by students pursuing different programs in the context of online learning at SMC. Result: The study revealed the distinct experiences and challenges faced by students in different online learning programs. The same finding was observed in a study conducted by Chan et al. in 2022. For instance, students pursuing a bachelor of science degree in psychology noted challenges related to the practicality of conducting experiments online. On the other hand, students in the Bachelor of the Arts in English Language (BAEL) found it comparatively easier to adapt to online learning. These findings support the idea that program-specific demands significantly influence online learning experiences (Hews et al. 2022).

Q 4: On the perceptions and attitudes of students toward online learning in a post-pandemic college education setting and how do these attitudes shape their overall learning experiences. Result: The participants exhibited a range of perceptions and attitudes toward online learning. The same finding was explicated in the study conducted by Abdel Latif in 2022. Some students had positive attitudes and appreciated the flexibility and convenience offered. "S-Part 3" noted, "I enjoy the flexibility to create my own schedule." In contrast, others expressed negative sentiments, missing the social aspects of the traditional classes. "S-Part 8" stated, "I miss interacting with classmates." The same output was obtained in a study by Cheong et al. in 2021. These findings align with the extensive literature on the influence of attitudes on the overall online learning experience (Hews et al. 2022).

Q 5: On strategies and recommendations can be derived from the findings to enhance the quality of online education at SMC, contributing to the broader discourse on the future of higher education in the digital age. Result: This study generated valuable insights that can be used to enhance the quality of online education at St. Michael's College. The same observation was made in a study conducted by Cheong et al. (2021). Strategies include improving Internet infrastructure, offering additional support for students with technology

barriers, and designing courses that cater to program-specific needs. These recommendations contribute to the broader discourse on the future of higher education in the digital age by addressing critical issues related to technology access and program-specific adaptation in online learning (Abdel Latif 2022).

B. Results of Informal Interviews

The interviews conducted with the randomly selected twenty participants ("S-Part 1" to "S-Part 20") offered in-depth insights into their lived experiences with online learning at SMC. These interviews unveiled the nuanced aspects of their engagement, technology access, program-specific challenges, attitudes, and practical recommendations.

Student Engagement: The interviews revealed various factors influencing student engagement in online learning. Participants liked the flexibility of online classes, but felt isolated without face-to-face interactions. These findings agree with previous research on online learning's trade-offs (OECD 2021).

Technology Access: The interviews revealed how online learning experiences varied depending on the availability and quality of personal laptops and Internet connections. Some participants enjoyed the convenience, while others faced difficulties. These experiences reflected the digital divide in online education (Lim et al. 2022).

Program-specific Challenges: The interviews revealed how online learning affected students differently depending on their programs. Psychology students faced difficulties in conducting experiments online and lacked hands-on practice. BAEL students adapted better to the online environment. This finding suggests the need for customized online education for different programs (Dos Santos 2022).

Attitudes and Perceptions: The interviews showed how online learning was perceived differently by the participants. Some liked the autonomy and flexibility, while others missed the social and engaging aspects of face-to-face learning. These attitudes underscore the importance of individual perceptions in online learning experiences (Rapanta et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Improvement: The participants suggested improving technical support, interactivity, and guidance for online learning at SMC. These suggestions matched the wider discussion on enhancing online education quality and addressing the participants' needs and challenges (Lee et al., 2022).

The interviews revealed the complex factors affecting student engagement, technology access, and program-specific challenges in online learning at SMC. These factors should guide the improvement of online education quality.

C. Results of Observations

The observations offered a distinctive perspective on the experiences of the twenty participants ("S-Part 1" to "S-Part 20") within the online learning environment at SMC. These observations, combined with insights from participants and relevant literature, illuminated various aspects of student engagement, technology access, program-specific challenges, attitudes, and recommendations.

Student Engagement: The observations showed how students used different strategies to engage in online learning. Some showed self-discipline and participation, while others struggled with focus, multitasking, or online platform. These reflected different levels of engagement (Smit & Onwuegbuzie, 2018).

Technology Access: The observations showed how technology access and study space influenced students' engagement in online classes. Some had reliable access and space, while others faced disruptions. These findings highlighted the digital divide and its effects on online learning (Blaikie, 2018).

Program-Specific Challenges: The observations showed how online learning affected students differently depending on their programs. Psychology students faced difficulties in conducting experiments online and lacked hands-on practice. BAEL students adapted better to the online environment. This finding suggests the need for customized online education for different programs (Ciesielska et al., 2018).

Attitudes and Perceptions: The observations showed how online learning was perceived differently by the participants. Some were engaged and enthusiastic, especially BA and philosophy students. Others were disengaged and disinterested, showing more difficulties. These attitudes affected online learning experiences (Farid, 2022).

Recommendations for Improvement: The observations showed the need for better technical support and more interactive and engaging online courses, as suggested by participants. These findings matched the wider discussions on improving online education quality (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022).

Incorporating observations into this research enriched the understanding of students' experiences in online learning, providing real-time insights into the challenges and strengths of online education at SMC. This underscores the multifaceted nature of student engagement, technology access, program-specific needs, attitudes, and the importance of implementing practical recommendations to enhance the online learning experience.

D. Thematic Analysis

In this section, the collected data undergo analysis to identify key themes derived from the in-depth literature reviews, informal interviews, and observations. These themes offer valuable insights into the aspects of student engagement, technology access, and the overall online learning experience in the college setting during the post-pandemic period.

1) Student Engagement and Motivation Insights: The literature (Namboodiri, 2022) shows the importance of student motivation and engagement for online learning. Interviews and observations revealed different views from active online students. One student said, "*A supportive online learning community has been a game-changer for me. It's what keeps me looking forward to every class.*" Another said, "*I've found that having a clear sense of purpose in online classes greatly boosts my motivation. It keeps me engaged throughout the course.*" A third student said, "*While online learning offers flexibility, it's up to the student to stay motivated. Personally, I set a schedule, and that really helps me remain engaged.*" These quotes show the complexity of student engagement and motivation online, highlighting the role of a supportive community, clear goals, and personal strategies.

2) Technology Access and Digital Divide: Technology access affects online learning (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2021). Interviews and observations showed the consequences of the digital divide and the need to address it. One interviewee (S-Part 9) said, "*I struggled to keep up with online classes because of my bad internet connection.*" This shows the challenges of limited technology access. Another interviewee (S-Part 4) said, "*Access to digital resources transformed my learning experience. It opened up a world of knowledge and opportunities.*" This shows the benefits of technology access. S-Part 12 said, "*The disparities in technology access are real and affect people's education and opportunities. We need policies and initiatives to bridge this gap.*" These quotes show the impact of technology disparities and the need to reduce the digital divide in online education.

3) Program-Specific Challenges: Online learning varies across academic programs (Zizka & Probst, 2022). Interviews revealed the distinct needs and difficulties of different disciplines. S-Part 6 said, "*In BS-Psych course, the lack of hands-on labs is a significant hurdle. We miss out on crucial practical experience.*" S-Part 11 noted, "*For BAEL subjects, the transition to online learning has been smoother.* We adapt easily to discussions and reading assignments." S-Part 2 emphasized, "*Recognizing the unique needs of each program is essential. We should tailor online courses to accommodate diverse academic requirements effectively.*" These quotes highlight the program-specific challenges and the need for customized online courses.

4) Diverse Attitudes and Perceptions: Diverse student attitudes and perceptions influence their online learning experiences (Li & Yu, 2022). Informal interviews and observations have highlighted the importance of acknowledging and addressing these varied attitudes and perceptions. One interviewee (S-Part 8) emphasized the significance of diverse perspectives, stating, "*Students come from various backgrounds and have different expectations. Recognizing this diversity is crucial for effective online education.*" Conversely, another participant (S-Part 14) offered a different viewpoint, noting, "*While some students thrive in online learning, others struggle to stay motivated. It's essential to provide support tailored to individual needs.*" A broader perspective emerged through these interviews, with S-Part 5 emphasizing, "*Understanding the spectrum of attitudes and perceptions can lead to more inclusive online learning experiences. We should create flexible, adaptable learning environments.*" These quotes collectively underscore the impact of diverse attitudes and perceptions on online learning and the importance of accommodating these differences to enhance the overall educational experience.

5) Technical Issues and Support Needs: Students often encounter technical issues and require comprehensive technical support (Eslit, 2023). Informal interviews and observations have emphasized the crucial role of robust technical support in ensuring smooth online learning experiences. One interviewee (T-Part 17) described the challenges, stating, "*I've faced numerous technical glitches during online classes, from connectivity issues to software problems. It's frustrating when you're trying to learn.*" Conversely, another participant (S-Part 3) shed light on the importance of support, noting, "*Having responsive technical support is a game-changer. When issues arise, it's reassuring to know there's help available.*" A broader perspective emerged through these interviews, with S-Part 8 emphasizing, "*Technical support can make or break the online learning experience. It's not just about addressing issues but providing guidance and resources for students to navigate the digital environment effectively.*" These quotes collectively underscore the significance of addressing technical issues and providing comprehensive support to enhance the quality of online education.

6) Strategies for Interaction and Engagement: Promoting interaction and engagement is crucial for effective online learning (Ensmann et al., 2021). Informal interviews and observations revealed that active engagement and the use of interactive features improved the quality of learning. One interviewee (S-Part 10) emphasized the importance of interaction, stating, "*Participating in discussions and collaborative activities with fellow students is like bringing the classroom to your screen. It keeps you engaged.*" In contrast, another participant (S-Part 17) highlighted the value of interactive features, noting, "*Interactive quizzes, simulations, and multimedia content made learning more enjoyable and effective. It's not just reading; it's hands-on learning.*" A broader perspective emerged through these interviews, with S-Part 5 emphasizing, "*A combination of interaction and interactive elements creates a dynamic online learning environment. It caters to different learning styles and keeps us motivated.*" These quotes collectively underscore the significance of strategies for interaction and engagement in online learning, emphasizing the value of peer interactions and interactive content to improve the overall quality of the learning experience.

7) Adaptability and Resilience: Students demonstrate adaptability and resilience during the transition to online learning (Shin & Hickey, 2021). Informal interviews and observations aligned with the broader discourse on students' resilience and adaptability, particularly during the pandemic. One interviewee (A-Part 9) highlighted their adaptability, stating, "*The abrupt shift to online learning was challenging, but it taught me to adapt quickly and find new ways to study effectively.*" Conversely, another participant (A-Part 4) emphasized the importance of resilience, noting, "*The uncertainties of the pandemic were emotionally taxing, but I learned to persevere and stay motivated to complete my coursework.*" These quotes collectively underscore the adaptability and resilience that students have shown during the transition to online learning, reflecting their ability to adjust to new circumstances and overcome challenges.

8) Educational Equity and Inclusivity: Addressing disparities in online learning, especially in terms of access and support, is vital (Parida et al., 2023). Informal interviews and observations emphasized the significance of promoting educational equity in online education. One interviewee (E-Part 11) stressed the importance of addressing access disparities, stating, "*Not everyone has the same technology or internet access. It's crucial to ensure that all students can participate equally.*" In contrast, another participant (E-Part 3) highlighted the need for inclusive support, noting, "*Online learning should be accessible to individuals with diverse needs. Providing tailored support and accommodations is essential.*" These quotes collectively underscore the importance of addressing educational equity and inclusivity in online learning, emphasizing the need for equitable access and support to create an inclusive educational environment.

9) Inclusive Curriculum and Diverse Perspectives: A diverse and inclusive curriculum plays a significant role in promoting equity in online education (Rapanta et al., 2021). Informal interviews and observations revealed the impact of incorporating diverse perspectives and materials in the curriculum to foster inclusivity. One interviewee (S-Part 7) highlighted the value of diverse readings, stating, "*Reading materials from different backgrounds and cultures broadened my horizons and made me feel more included in the learning process.*" Another participant (S-Part 12) emphasized the importance of inclusive content, noting, "*Incorporating content that represents various voices and experiences is essential. It helps all students feel seen and heard.*" In a broader context, S-Part 4 underscored, "*A curriculum that celebrates diversity benefits everyone. It's not just about representation but also enriching the learning experience with multiple perspectives.*" These quotes collectively

underline the importance of an inclusive curriculum and diverse perspectives to promote equity and inclusivity in online education, recognizing the value of representing a variety of voices and experiences in the educational content.

10) Future of Higher Education in the Digital Age: The research aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on the future of higher education in the digital age (Fran, 2022). Informal interviews and observations, as reflected by S-Part 14, highlight the rapid transformation of higher education, with the participant stating, "*Online platforms have reshaped the educational landscape. Traditional boundaries are fading*." However, in contrast, S-Part 5 provided a different perspective, emphasizing the need to balance digital innovation with educational values: "*While digital tools offer great potential, we should ensure that they align with the core principles of education.*" These opposing views are aligned with the evolving landscape of higher education in the digital era. As observed in the research and echoed by S-Part 9, a BS-Psychology student, "*The digital age demands adaptability, but it's vital to preserve the quality of education. We need to find a harmonious blend of tradition and innovation.*"

Discussion

The findings offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities arising from the transition to online learning in post-pandemic college education at CAS, St. Michael's College, AY 2022-2023. The theoretical framework, grounded in the works of Alexander (2020), Dede and Richards (2020), and Nichols (2020), guided the exploration of the "new normal" in higher education and its impact on student engagement, technology access, and the overall online learning experience.

The findings show the importance of online learning for student engagement. The literature review (Bashir et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2022) supports the need for flexible and engaging online teaching. Students were more engaged when instructors used interactive, real-world, and collaborative online activities.

The findings support the theoretical framework (OECD 2021) that digital resources are crucial for online learning. Students with better technology access had more positive experiences. This matches the recommendations to improve digital infrastructure and access (Siddiqua & Batool, 2022).

The interviews and observations showed how students faced different challenges in their programs. The literature review (Fran, 2022; Cahapin et al., 2023) supported the need for program-specific support. Students had unique challenges in their coursework. The researcher suggested teachers customize online content and support for diverse students (Tsiligkiris and Ilieva 2022).

The findings show the importance of student perceptions for online learning. The literature (Zizka & Probst, 2022; Yan et al., 2022) supports addressing student concerns and support. A positive attitude leads to a better experience. Institutions should offer support and feedback to students (Ensmann et al., 2021).

Implications in Terms of Theory, Practice, and Future Research

This section evaluates the findings in light of the thesis and framework, showing how the "new normal" in higher education requires digital resources, inclusive design, and tailored support for diverse students.

Theory: The study contributes to the understanding of the "new normal" in higher education, highlighting the importance of digital resources, inclusive design, and tailored support for diverse students. It also shows how student attitudes and perceptions affect online learning, suggesting more research on online education psychology.

Practice: The study recommends that school administrators, teachers, and students adopt various strategies to improve online education quality, such as enhancing digital infrastructure and access, customizing online content and methods, fostering a supportive online environment, and providing feedback and support.

Future Research: The study calls for future research on the long-term impact of the "new normal" on student outcomes, the psychological factors of online learning, and the comparative studies of different online education strategies and best practices.

Conclusion

Overall, this qualitative study explored the impact of the transition to online learning on student engagement, technology access, and experiences of CAS students at St. Michael's College, Iligan City, Philippines during the 2nd semester of AY 2022-2023. The research method, which included an in-depth literature review, informal interviews, observations, and thematic analysis, was instrumental in revealing critical insights into the challenges and coping mechanisms of students as they adapted to the new normal in higher education. The theoretical framework provides a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics of online learning and the post-pandemic college education setting. The findings underscore the need for continuous adaptation and improvement in online education to enhance student engagement and learning experiences. The implications of this research are significant for school administrators, teachers, students, and future researchers, calling for the development of innovative strategies that prioritize student well-being, accessibility, and learning quality. Future researchers should delve deeper into the evolving landscape of online education, further enriching the literature on the future of higher education in the digital landscape.

References

Abdel Latif, M. M. (2022). Coping with COVID-19-related online English teaching challenges: teacher educators' suggestions. Elt Journal, 76(1), 20-331.

Alexander, B. (2020). Academia Next: The Futures of Higher Education. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Alhammadi, S. (2021). The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning quality and practices in higher education—using deep and surface approaches. Education Sciences, 11(9), 4621.

Aslan, A., Silvia, S., Nugroho, B. S., Ramli, M., & Rusiadi, R. (2020). Teacher's leadership teaching strategy supporting student learning during the covid-19 disruption. Nidhomul Haq: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam, 5(3), 321-33.

Bandura, A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Prentice-Hall.

Barrot, J. S., Llenares, I. I., & del Rosario, L. S. (2021). Students' online learning challenges during the pandemic and how they cope with them: The case of the Philippines Education and Information Technologies, 26, 7321–733.

Bashir A., Bashir S., Rana K., Lambert P. and Vernallis, A., (2021). Post-COVID-19 Adaptations; the Shifts Towards Online Learning, Hybrid Course Delivery and the Implications for Biosciences Courses in the Higher Education Setting. Front. Educ. 6:711619. doi:10.3389/feduc.2021.71161

Bihasa, R. K. S., Low, M. T. E., & Potot, K. J. S. (2022). Post-Pandemic Approach on Learning Mixed-Mode Education (PALM): A Process towards Flex Instructional Delivery.

Blaikie, N. (2018). Confounding issues related to determining sample size in qualitative research. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 21(5), 635-64.

Bork-Hüffer, T., Kulcar, V., Brielmair, F., Markl, A., Immer, D. M., Juen, B., ... & Kaufmann, K. (2021). University students' perception, evaluation, and spaces of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria: what can we learn for post-pandemic educational futures? Sustainability, 13(14), 759.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide, 1st Edition. SAGE Publications Ltd; 1st edition (December 6, 2021). ISBN-10:1473953235,ISBN-13:978-1473953239. https:// www.amazon. com/ Thematic-Analysis-Practical-Virginia-Braun /dp/147395323

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health, 13(2), 201-216.

Bruillard, E. (2020). Rethinking Pedagogy: exploring the Potential of Digital Technology in Achieving Quality Education. Cambridge University Press. A blog from University of Paris, EDA research unit. https://www.cambridge.org/partnership/research/rethinking-pedagogy-post-covid-19-world

Cahapin, E. L., Santiago Jr, C. S., Malabag, B. A., Reyes, J. L., Legaspi, G. S., Benedicto, M. J., ... & Legaspi, G. S. (2023). Sentiment Analysis of Students' Perception towards the Implementation of Limited In-Person Learning: A Post-Pandemic Perspective. International Journal of Computing Sciences Research, 7, 1664-1684.

Cardoso Ermel, A.P., Lacerda, D.P., Morandi, M.I.W.M., Gauss, L. (2021). Literature Analysis. In: Literature Reviews. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75722-9_4

Caulfield, J. (2022). How to Cite an Interview in APA Style | Format & Examples. Scribbr. Retrieved October 2, 2023, from https://www.scribbr.com/apa-examples/interview/

Chan, R., Bista, K., & Allen, R. (Eds.). (2022). Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education during COVID-19: International Perspectives and Experiences. Routledge1.

Cheong, C., Coldwell-Neilson, J., MacCallum, K., Luo, T., & Scime, A. (Eds.). (2021). COVID-19 and Education: Learning and Teaching in a Pandemic-Constrained Environment. Informing Science2.

Chigbu, U.E.; Atiku, S.O.; Du Plessis, C.C. (2023). The Science of Literature Reviews: Searching, Identifying, Selecting, and Synthesising. Publications 2023, 11, 2. https://doi.org/10.3390/publications11010002

Ciesielska, M., Boström, K.W., Öhlander, M. (2018). Observation Methods. In: Ciesielska, M., Jemielniak, D. (eds) Qualitative Methodologies in Organization Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65442-3_2

Creswell, J. W., & Báez, J. C. (2020). 30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher. Sage Publications.

Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology. MIS Quarterly, 13(3), 319-340.

Davis, J., Mengersen, K., Bennett, S. et al. Viewing systematic reviews and meta-analysis in social research through different lenses. SpringerPlus 3, 511 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1186/2193-1801-3-511

Dawadi Caulfield, J. (2023). How to Do Thematic Analysis | Step-by-Step Guide & Examples. Scribbr. Retrieved September 12, 2023, from https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/

Dede, C.J., & Richards, J. (Eds.). (2020). The 60-Year Curriculum: New Models for Lifelong Learning in the Digital Economy. London, UK: Routledge.

Dos Santos, L. M. (2022). Online learning after the COVID-19 pandemic: Learners' motivations. Frontiers in Education

Ensmann, S., Whiteside, A., Gomez-Vasquez, L., & Sturgill, R. (2021). Connections before Curriculum: The Role of Social Presence during COVID-19 Emergency Remote Learning for Students. Online Learning, 25(3), 36-56.

Eslit, E. R. (2023). Voices of Resiliency: Exploring the Transformative Journey of Educators and Students in the Post-Pandemic Education Era.

Fabriz, S., Mendzheritskaya, J., & Stehle, S. (2021). Impact of synchronous and asynchronous settings of online teaching and learning in higher education on students' learning experience during COVID-19. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 4544.

Farid, S. (2022). Observation. In: Islam, M.R., Khan, N.A., Baikady, R. (eds) Principles of Social Research Methodology. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5441-2_25

Fran. O. (2022). Online learning in a post-pandemic world: The Future of Learning Report 2022. Future Learn. https://www.futurelearn.com/info/insights/online-learning-post-pandemic

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. The Internet and Higher Education, 2(2-3), 87-105.

Hews, R., McNamara, J., & Nay, Z. (2022). Prioritising Lifeload over Learning Load: Understanding Post-Pandemic Student Engagement. Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 19(2), 128-145.

Joaquin, J.J.B., Biana, H.T. and Dacela, M.A. (2020). The Philippine Higher Education Sector in the Time of COVID-19. Front. Educ. 5:576371. doi:10.3389/feduc.2020.576371. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2020.576371/full

Kabilan, M. K., & Annamalai, N. (2022). Online teaching during COVID-19 pandemic: A phenomenological study of university educators' experiences and challenges. Studies in Educational Evaluation, 74, 101182.

Lee, K., Fanguy, M., Bligh, B., & Lu, X. S. (2022). Adoption of online teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic: a systematic analysis of changes in university teaching activity. Educational Review, 74(3), 460-483.

Li, M., & Yu, Z. (2022). Teachers' satisfaction, role, and digital literacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sustainability, 14(3), 1121.

Lim, L. T. S., Regencia, Z. J. G., Dela Cruz, J. R. C., Ho, F. D. V., Rodolfo, M. S., Ly-Uson, J., & Baja, E. S. (2022). Assessing the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, shift to online learning, and social media use on the mental health of college students in the Philippines: A mixed-method study protocol. PLOS ONE.

Mavroudi, A., & Papanikolaou, K. (2022). A Case Study on How Distance Education May Inform Post-Pandemic University Teaching. International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 23(4), 57-74.

Mkwizu, K. H., & Junio-Sabio, C. Students' Services in Pre and Post COVID-19 Pandemic: An ODL Overview.

Mohajan, D., & Mohajan, H. (2022). Exploration of Coding in Qualitative Data Analysis: Grounded Theory Perspective.

Mthuli, S. A., Ruffin, F., & Singh, N. (2022). 'Define, Explain, Justify, Apply'(DEJA): An analytic tool for guiding qualitative research sample size. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 25(6), 809-821.

Mwita, K. (2022). Factors influencing data saturation in qualitative studies. International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478), 11(4), 414-420.

Namboodiri, S. (2022). Zoom-ing past "the new normal"? Understanding students' engagement with online learning in higher education during the covid-19 pandemic. In Re-imagining Educational Futures in Developing Countries: Lessons from Global Health Crises (pp. 139-158). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Narca, M. L. G., & Caballes, D. G. (2021). Learning Motivation: Strategies to Increase Students' Engagement in Online Learning at San Sebastian College-Recoletos, Manila. Online Submission, 2(4), 573-580.

Ng, L. K., & Lo, C. K. (2022). Enhancing Online Instructional Approaches for Sustainable Business Education in the Current and Post-Pandemic Era: An Action Research Study of Student Engagement. Education Sciences, 13(1), 42.

Nichols, M. (2020). Transforming Universities with Digital Distance Education: The Future of Formal Learning. London, UK: Routledge.

Nikolopoulou, K. (2022). Students' Mobile Phone Practices for Academic Purposes: Strengthening Post-Pandemic University Digitalization. Sustainability, 14(22), 14958.

OECD. (2021). How Learning Continued during the COVID-19 Pandemic. OECD Publishing.

Online Learning Consortium. (n.d.). OLC Online Education Books. Retrieved from https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/book-series/

Parida, S., Dhakal, S. P., Dayaram, K., Mohammadi, H., Ayentimi, D. T., Amankwaa, A., & D'Cruz, D. (2023). Rhetoric and realities in Australian universities of student engagement in online learning: Implications for a post-pandemic era. The International Journal of Management Education, 21(2), 100795.

Pozo, J. I., Pérez Echeverría, M. P., Cabellos, B., & Sánchez, D. L. (2021). Teaching and learning in times of COVID-19: Uses of digital technologies during school lockdowns. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 656776.

Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., & Koole, M. (2020). Online university teaching during and after the Covid-19 crisis: Refocusing teacher presence and learning activity. Postdigital science and education, 2, 923-945.

Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., & Koole, M. (2021). Balancing technology, pedagogy and the new normal: Post-pandemic challenges for higher education. Postdigital Science and Education, 3(3), 715-742.

Rutakumwa, R., Mugisha, J. O., Bernays, S., Kabunga, E., Tumwekwase, G., Mbonye, M., & Seeley, J. (2020). Conducting in-depth interviews with and without voice recorders: a comparative analysis. Qualitative Research, 20(5), 565-581.

Sebele-Mpofu, F. Y. (2020). Saturation controversy in qualitative research: Complexities and underlying assumptions. A literature review. Cogent Social Sciences, 6(1), 1838706.

Shin, M., & Hickey, K. (2021). Needs a little TLC: Examining college students' emergency remote teaching and learning experiences during COVID-19. Journal of Further and Higher Education, 45(7), 973-986.

Siddiqua, N., & Batool, R. (2022). Post Pandemic Research Trends on Challenges and Outcomes in Education: A Case-study of HEC Recognized Journals of Education 2020-2021. Sustainable Business and Society in Emerging Economies, 4(2), 627-638.

Smit, B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2018). Observations in Qualitative Inquiry: When What You See Is Not What You See. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918816766

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines, Journal of Business Research, Volume 104, 2019, Pages 333-339, ISSN 0148-2963, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

Squires, V. (2023). Thematic Analysis. In: Okoko, J.M., Tunison, S., Walker, K.D. (eds) Varieties of Qualitative Research Methods. Springer Texts in Education. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04394-9_72

St. Michael's College. College Of Arts and Sciences - St. Michael's College (smciligan.edu.ph).

Stewart, W. H. (2021). A global crash-course in teaching and learning online: A thematic review of empirical Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) studies in higher education during Year 1 of COVID-19. Open praxis, 13(1), 89-102.

Swain, J., & King, B. (2022). Using Informal Conversations in Qualitative Research. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 21. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221085056

Swain, J., & Spire, Z. (2020). The Role of Informal Conversations in Generating Data, and the Ethical and Methodological Issues They Raise. Volume 21, No. 1, Art. 10. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/ eprint/ 10091304/ 1/ FQS%20informal%20conversations

Swain, J., & Zachery, S., (2020). The Role of Informal Conversations in Generating Data, and the Ethical and Methodological Issues They Raise [49 paragraphs]. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 21(1), Art. 10, http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.1.3344.

Terry, G. & Nikki Hayfield, N. (2021). Essentials of Thematic Analysis. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS https://doi.org/10.1037/0000238-001

Tsiligkiris, V., & Ilieva, J. (2022). Global engagement in the post-pandemic world: Challenges and responses. Perspective from the UK. Higher Education Quarterly, 76(2), 343-366.

Tsiligkiris, V., & Ilieva, J. (2022). Global engagement in the post-pandemic world: Challenges and responses. Perspective from the UK. Higher Education Quarterly, 76(2), 343-366.

Ulum, H. (2022). The effects of online education on academic success: A meta-analysis studyEducation and Information Technologies, 27, 429–450.

Yan, H., Zhang, H., & Lam, J. F. (2022). A Qualitative Study on the Model of Factors Influencing Online Interactivity and Student Learning Engagement in the Post-Pandemic Era. Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice, 22(17).

Zhang, L., Carter Jr, R. A., Qian, X., Yang, S., Rujimora, J., & Wen, S. (2022). Academia's responses to crisis: A bibliometric analysis of literature on online learning in higher education during COVID-19. British Journal of Educational Technology, 53(3), 620-646.

Zizka, L., & Probst, G. (2022). Teaching during COVID-19: Faculty members' perceptions during and after an "exceptional" semester. Journal of International Education in Business, 15(2), 202-220.

Contact emails: edgareslit@yahoo.com,
e.eslit@my.smciligan.edu.ph
edgareslit@gmail.com