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Exploring the Impact of Online Education on Higher Education Students' Learning Experience in Australia

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the impact of online education on the learning experiences of higher education students in Australia, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It investigates how the shift to digital platforms has influenced educational outcomes, student engagement, and institutional practices. Drawing from both media discourse and scholarly literature, the study examines two central factors: technological infrastructure and the evolving role of online educators. While online platforms offer flexibility, accessibility, and digital skill development, they also present challenges such as lack of social connection, unequal access, and insufficient pedagogical adaptation. Teachers face a steep learning curve in adapting traditional methods to virtual environments, and students often struggle with isolation and reduced motivation. The analysis highlights both the potential and limitations of online education, suggesting that blended learning and improved teacher training may help bridge existing gaps. Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of institutional support, personalized teaching strategies, and student self-regulation in enhancing the overall online learning experience. By addressing these interconnected challenges, Australian universities can better support their students in an increasingly digital educational landscape.

**Keywords:** online education; higher education; student learning experience; digital infrastructure; teacher adaptation

1. Introduction

Online education in Australia has a long history, partly due to its potential to address the challenges posed by the country's widely dispersed population. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, online education has become more widely used in higher education. There is an increasing demand for online education at Australian universities and colleges [1]. However, this phenomenon not only reflects the increased popularity of online education after the pandemic but also reflects an issue about the effectiveness of online education on higher education students' learning. Some researchers point out that many Australian universities may still need to improve the quality of online education to prepare for large-scale enrollment.

2. The Issue in the Media

Based on this context, the media has begun focusing on the debate surrounding online education in higher education, that is, can online education effectively improve the learning experience of higher education students in Australia? In order to explore this debate in the media, it can be divided into two perspectives. On the one hand, it focuses on the use of online infrastructure. On the other hand, the media mainly focuses on the teacher's role in online education.

Some people suggest that online education can improve students’ learning experience by leveraging online infrastructure. On the one hand, Jamesrs pointed out that the online education platform provides the opportunity for students’ learning flexibility, and it can be seen as a bridge between school and student that breaks the limits of space [2]. Students can explore diverse perspectives online that help them improve their learning experience [2]. On the other hand, the online platform as a technological tool also promotes students’ essential technological skills that can help them be more proficient in the digital age [2].

However, some people argue that the use of online infrastructure in online education cannot effectively enhance higher education students’ learning experience. Firstly, online students often lack a sense of belonging to the school. This hinders students’ motivation to participate in class. In a government report by Australian Universities Accord Review Panel pointed out that technological change has a negative impact on the students’ sense of belonging to their universities, which undermines the uniqueness of campus life [3]. Additionally, many university students who go to university not only want to get a degree but also want to have university experience and lifestyle. This experience is hardly ever achieved from an online platform. Secondly, Giemza discovered that not all students have equal access to online education because students from poorer families often do not have advanced technological tools to support their learning [4]. Additionally, different internet speeds will affect the degree of students' reception of online class content. It presents a barrier to more effective learning for students.

Another belief held that online education can improve students' learning experience through the role of the online teacher. In order to adapt to the trend of online education, teachers have started to change their teaching approaches. A research report on online VET by Hume et al. suggests that teachers use a variety of technological tools to encourage students' engagement and motivation, such as expanding the online communication channels that can produce positive feedback to improve students’ learning experience [5]. Additionally, Henebery found that teachers have tried to explore new pedagogical methods and technological tools that can enrich the learning experience significantly [6]. Specifically, teachers have begun using technological tools to analyze students’ learning behaviour, which can help them design more interactive content for the classroom [7]. Moreover, online teachers in Australia are encouraged to build a group that can share the online teaching experience [6]. This can provide teachers with more opportunities to improve their teaching strategies by communicating with others. Therefore, suitable online education strategies can help enhance higher education students’ learning experience effectively.

Nevertheless, critics argue that online teachers have limited influence in enhancing students' learning experiences. According to Bayley and Yates, many teachers are finding it difficult to meet the demands of the digital education era, and they cannot develop online skills fast enough [8]. This has become a barrier to the effectiveness of online education. Moreover, higher education teachers currently lack a novel approach to creating an online environment that fosters student engagement and social connectedness [8]. If the online learning environment does not engage students in the classroom, it will affect students' expectations of online education, ultimately undermining their learning experience.

3. Scholarly Writing in the Field

After discussing media perspectives on online education in higher education students' learning experiences, in this part, this essay will explore various key studies in the field of online education, examining specific perspectives from both supporting and opposing viewpoints. Previous studies have attempted to explore the impact of online education on higher education students’ learning experiences in Australia.

Some researchers believe that online education can effectively improve higher education students’ learning experience. In their paper ‘Online Education in Australia’, Australian universities have advanced online learning management systems to collect quality data that can transform the student experience. Online learning management systems can analyze students’ learning data to reflect the students’ current learning issues, enhancing students’ effective learning. On the other hand, many universities use various technological tools to offer more flexible online portfolios, which can give students more online resources to study. From the teacher’s perspective, online education teachers design classes with more short videos and collaboration opportunities for students and less traditional teaching approaches, such as lectures. Online learning platforms can create a flexible environment for students that helps them study more personally.

Moreover, teachers are provided with online training resources from online learning systems to enhance their ability to deliver effective online instruction. Stephens and Curwood emphasized in their article ‘Teacher Education in Time of Disruption’ that teacher education programs provide new skills and pedagogy that help teachers redesign the courses to suit the online environment, and then teachers are able to create an appropriate environment to enhance students’ online learning [9]. More importantly, the teacher education programs also highlight that teachers need to apply flexibility in unpredictable classroom situations [9]. This capacity for online teachers can save time on the online teaching issue and meet the individual needs of students as much as possible. In addition to teacher’s ability to change classes flexibly, Stephens and Curwood also mentioned that online teacher education offered by online learning systems also provides a model of effective online teaching approaches and psychological guidance [9]. This gives teachers confidence when teaching online, thus effectively enhancing students’ learning experience.

In contrast, some scholars have presented an alternative argument suggesting that online education may not effectively enhance the learning experience for higher education students in Australia. Teachers’ online teaching approaches have some shortcomings; specifically, the assessments teachers use in online courses may be too limited and not suitable for different types of higher education courses [10]. As a result, teachers may struggle to provide personalized feedback effectively. The use of long-term collaborative assessment in online education has caused pressure and hindered effective monitoring of students’ progress [10]. Similarly, the development of online assessments and feedback could not bridge the gap between theory and practice [11]. Teachers need to change the online assessment to apply technology in it because the current assessments cannot evaluate students’ learning well [11]. Additionally, teachers should consider re-evaluating their role in the assessment process [11]. The gap between learning and practice may negatively impact teachers’ roles in online education, making these roles challenging to fulfill and potentially undermining students’ learning experiences. On the other hand, from an online education infrastructure perspective, the Technology Acceptance Model used in the online education assessment cannot produce personal feedback effectively; it has a gap between the intended purpose of tool design and its actual implementation [10]. The technological tools do not work effectively, which will hinder the students learning.

4. Wider Research in this Area

Online education is a relatively new controversy in the field of education, and existing empirical research mainly discusses the impact of online education on higher education students’ learning experience from different perspectives. Davis et al., Biedermann and Ahern, and Ferrer et al. analyze both sides of the argument, which will prompt more research to explore online education [11-13].

Based on the analysis of different online social work education practices in Australia, Davis et al. focused on online education in the social work education field, discuss how online education works i social work education, and what online teachers can play a role in students’ learning [12]. From an online infrastructure perspective, Davis et al. believe that Moodle’s development offers online students a comparable learning experience to face-to-face learning through perfect operation mode [12]. Technological tools can integrate guidance and learning materials together to promote a suitable online learning environment. On the other hand, many synchronous tools can help teachers deliver social work practical skills. Davis et al. demonstrated that online teachers strongly encourage collaboration in the class, and they give students clear guidance to improve the connection between teachers and students [12]. Therefore, online teachers play a key role in effective online education and significantly enhance students’ learning experiences.

However, Davis et al. also acknowledged that although online education can improve higher education students’ learning experience via technological infrastructure and online teachers, several barriers remain in the way of these factors fulfilling their intended roles [12]. This reflects that online teachers need to solve the issue of how to design teaching strategies with innovative ideas and how to solve the gap between high-technology and online education practice [12].

Biedermann and Ahern seek to explore the online education practice in Australian postgraduate nursing education, focusing on addressing students' experiences through qualitative analysis of a 55-item self-reporting online survey that captures participants' needs and experiences [13]. Biedermann and Ahern agreed that a learning management system as a tool helps teachers develop a good online environment, and a positive online environment can give online students a better learning experience [13]. Although the trend of online education is rapidly evolving and offers an ideal opportunity for teachers and students to update their teaching and learning methods, it also presents new challenges, this research by Biedermann and Ahern also raises concerns that may hinder the improvement of students’ learning experiences [13]. From a teacher’s perspective, Biedermann and Ahern suggest that teachers need to learn new skills for online education because there are many differences between online and traditional classes, and the lack of alternative methods will hinder the effectiveness of online teaching [13]. Biedermann and Ahern also mentioned that teachers have changed their role in online education, compared to face-to-face learning; teachers’ main role in online education is changing into the role of an ‘information booth attendant’ [13]. Many online teachers experience professional dissatisfaction with teaching online, which can negatively impact the effectiveness of online instruction and hinder the enhancement of students’ learning experiences [13].

Both previous articles begin by discussing the factors contributing to the implementation of online teaching in specific subject areas, and Ferrer et al. stand on online students’ perspective to analyze how we can consider students’ motivation in online education to improve their learning experience [11]. Ferrer et al. seek to investigate higher education students’ attitude toward online education, which focuses on the factors influencing students’ engagement in online courses [11]. This research focused on undergraduate students within the business faculty and analyzed the questionnaire data through a conceptual model.

Ferrer et al. discovered that students’ attitude toward online learning has a mediating role between internal and external motivations and their actual engagement [11]. Especially, this research also reflected that amotivation has a more significant and negative effect on online student engagement [11]. The authors emphasized that it can be changed by developing an online environment that requires teachers and online infrastructure to work together. From the teacher perspective, Ferrer et al. believe that teachers play a vital role in shaping students’ online attitude [11]. Teachers should pay more attention to designing interactive courses and giving online students clear guidance. From the online infrastructure perspective, developing a supportive learning management system that can help provide collaborative learning opportunities. However, this discussion pointed out that it has some limitations for fulfilling online students’ diverse needs in practice.

In summary, these three articles explain the situation of online education in the implementation process and involve online infrastructure and teachers. All researchers in this part agreed that online education can play a positive role in enhancing students’ learning experience through advanced technological tools and experienced online teachers, and they also mentioned that the challenges of online education hinder the effectiveness of online education. The difference lies in the slightly different demonstration methods used. Davis et al. mainly analyzed and summarized previous studies, while Biedermann and Ahern and Ferrer et al. added qualitative and quantitative data analysis [11-13]. Additionally, from research content’s perspective, Biedermann and Ahern considered teachers’ emotional experiences in online teaching, and Ferrer et al. emphasized online students’ motivation in online learning [11,13]. It provides new perspectives for researching online education.

5. Exploring the Implications

The debate on whether online education can effectively enhance the learning experience of higher education students in Australia serves as a reminder for stakeholders to improve it. This part will explore the implications of this issue from the perspective of teachers, education institutions, and students.

From teachers’ perspective, Biedermann and Ahern highlighted that while online education’s development gives teachers a chance to renovate their teaching methods [13]. This challenge is often due to the limitations of teachers’ technological skills. Stone added that teachers may find it difficult to find an approach to learning technological skills effectively [14]. Thus, it is important for institutions to focus on online teachers’ training programs. Adding more technology skills can help educators create diverse course assignments [12]. On the other hand, Biedermann and Ahern also discovered that many online teachers have struggled to adapt to online classrooms, often carrying over the traditional mindset ingrained from their experience in conventional settings [13]. This is particularly evident in more hands-on disciplines, such as laboratory-based sciences or performing arts, where the transition to online teaching poses significant challenges [13,14]. It reminds the importance of online teachers redefining their roles and engaging with students early to alleviate their anxiety prior to the commencement of online courses. To help teachers address the challenges of online teaching, institutions must offer guidance and cultivate a supportive culture to maximize effectiveness [15].

Furthermore, online assessment poses challenges to online learning; therefore, institutions should develop a policy framework to support diverse online assessment methods in higher education [10]. This can enhance both the effectiveness and fairness for online students, ensuring they receive the same learning experience as their on-campus counterparts. From the students’ perspective, online students often feel isolated compared to face-to-face students because they often feel ignored by institutions [14]. This phenomenon demonstrated that online students’ connections and communication with each other need the support of institutions. Institutions should establish systems of interventions that can fulfil online students’ needs. On the other hand, Davis et al. suggested that institutions should take responsibility for online students’ satisfaction. To meet students’ needs, institutions should evaluate and adapt their online offerings based on student feedback to improve the quality of online courses [12]. Addressing the needs of online students is something that not only institutions but also teachers need to improve. Moreover, in order to fulfil the demands of online students, teachers need to change their educational ideas and pedagogy compared to the traditional class, which improves online students’ belonging.

To some extent, this controversy has promoted global discussions on enhancing online education to meet students’ needs better. In China, researchers have explored the adaptation of online chemistry education in higher education, facing challenges similar to those in online teaching, such as methods that are not well-suited for online environments [16]. Huang also emphasized that more specific technological tools need to be designed to solve online students’ practice needs [16]. The effectiveness of online education depends not only on technological infrastructure and teachers’ teaching ability but also on the self-awareness of online students [16]. It gives us a new direction to consider students’ factors and think about how to make online education more effective [17]. Now, many researchers are considering using the blended learning model to enhance the effectiveness of online education [18]. This approach addresses practical challenges in online courses to some extent. Numerous Australian universities have experimented with this model to enhance knowledge delivery. This trend provides a valuable direction for research on integrating online and traditional education to enrich students’ learning experiences in the future [19].

6. Personal Reflection

According to academic research and my personal experience, online education can effectively improve the learning experience of higher education students in Australia. On the one hand, as an Australian university student, I have experienced online courses through Moodle and Zoom. Online education, with its flexibility and autonomy, can effectively enhance the learning experience of students. Given the flexibility of online education, it provides me more time and space to arrange my timetable, and more importantly, I can improve my personal knowledge through the meeting recordings. We also used Moodle, which is a student learning management system. We can share our ideas about the topics on this platform and learn from others' perspectives. On the other hand, based on academic research, we can see that online education plays a role in higher education students’ learning experience through the technological infrastructure and online teachers. Nowadays, online platforms can integrate diverse tools into one system. It can not only help teachers monitor students’ learning behaviors but also help students learn effectively. Additionally, there is also a teaching training program to guide teachers in learning online education skills, such as learning analytics, online communication skills, and other relevant competencies. It can help teachers create a positive online environment, which can make students feel like they belong in the online classroom and improve their engagement.

However, there are also some barriers that prevent online education from effectively enhancing the student's learning experience. From the online infrastructure perspective, technological tools are not fully compatible with online education; they cannot provide personalized feedback because they lack a specific framework. From the teacher's perspective, many teachers are not proficient with technological skills and do not adapt well to the transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Additionally, teaching strategies need to integrate technological tools; it’s a challenge for teachers to solve. This also indicates that teacher training is not thorough. Such training is often limited by financial support and institutional policies. The government and institutions should be more concerned about developing online education. More importantly, we cannot ignore online students’ self-discipline. It plays a crucial role in enhancing students’ learning experience.

As a final point, online education has an effective role in enhancing higher education students’ learning experience, but there are also many challenges we need to meet. Further research will pay more attention to finding ways to enhance students’ learning by improving the factors of online education.

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