

Online learners' experiences and views towards online courses: A case study of the University of the South Pacific

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Abstract

In higher education, demand for online courses has risen over the years, and higher education institutes (HEIs) are investing heavily in the development and delivery of online courses. As a regional university, the University of the South Pacific (USP) is no exception and has made an incremental shift from face-to-face and print methods to blended and fully online methods in course delivery. At USP, significant attention has been given to developing an online learning environment using the Moodle platform, upskilling academics and supporting employees to offer good experience to the learners regardless of their location. An area that needs research, however, is the study experiences of online learners. Are they getting what they expected from online learning? Are online courses intended to satisfy the styles and preferences of their learning? This study tries to answer these two questions by collecting online learners' opinions and experiences at USP. Data were collected from 75 learners registered in 3 online courses using a questionnaire. Positive student experiences of online learning included greater flexibility, timely feedback and greater opportunities for interaction with academic and peers. Challenges identified included poor internet connectivity and lack of familiarity with the online learning management system and tools for first time online learners. Students highly rated the use of multimedia, online learning materials and online assessments as positive contributors to their learning in online courses. Most of the learners were satisfied with online course design and delivery and reported positive learning experience for the three online courses at USP. However, 20 percent of the learners were not satisfied with their online learning experience. Some aspects such as course navigation and feedback system could be improved and training of first time online learners could further improve student learning experience.

Introduction

The University of the South Pacific University (USP) is a regional university with 12-member countries (Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu). USP serves as the leading provider of tertiary education in the sparsely populated South Pacific region, covering an area of over 33 million square kilometres. Within the past decade alone, there has been an increase in student interest for online courses at USP, thereby encouraging gradual shift from the traditional course delivery to online methods. USP began developing blended and online courses since the implementation of the Moodle, Learning Management System (LMS) in 2006. The blended delivery method utilises a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching, while the online mode is predominantly based on online teaching techniques and less than 20 percent face-to-face teaching or interaction. Most of the classes provided at USP are currently either face-to-face or blended modes of delivery (USP Handbook and Calendar, 2019). However, a number of online courses are being developed or converted from the other modes to online in line with the USP strategic plan 2019-2021.

Students' successful completion of online courses to a large extent depends on acceptable and satisfactory course design. Experts have found that within many online courses, learners'

dissatisfaction exists for several reasons such as methods of communication, getting the one on one assistance, and understanding the content, which are all necessary for learning success (Bawa, 2016; Gilbert, 2015; Nguyen, 2015; Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

The change from face-to-face to the online mode of delivery is a worldwide trend, and many universities around the globe are now offering online courses (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Most institutions of higher education are involved in some type of online learning that provides greater flexibility, is less costly and enables technological innovation to be used. However, there exists a paucity of research on understanding the expectations and experiences of students studying online courses especially in the South Pacific region.

Online students expect the means for navigating around an online class to be easy and self-explanatory (Kebritchi et al., 2017; Nguyen, 2015). The design of such an environment is important to ensure ease of use (Bryant & Bates, 2015). Such factors necessary for online education include the ease with access, clear directions for navigation, simple and easy delivery modes, and communication methods which require little effort (Ching & Hsu, 2015; Sun & Chen, 2016). Others, however, feel that a few strategies in the development of an online environment would be more productive. These include involving the learners in collaborative work, enlisting and providing a clear and consistent structure, and always keeping an open mind as students become acclimatized to the online environment (Arias et al., 2018).

Other experts believe it is highly advantageous to have mandatory learning sessions for every first time online student (Chawinga, 2017; Darling-Hammond et.al., 2019; Schindler, et al., 2017). Many schools have added a course in the freshman roster that introduces and teaches the use and navigation of online classes (Muldrow, 2014). Other schools have opted to not allow freshman to take online classes, citing they may not have the necessary time management skills required for such a course (Huss & Eastep, 2015). Even so, learning the specific features of a University or College's online environment is necessary for all students no matter what their age or year of school. From visiting the library for research to purchasing books for classes, to receiving grades, and even uploading papers through a plagiarism checking software are similarly required for all students.

Limited student perspective from online learners in the present knowledge leaves a significant gap and restricts the interpretation of the factors or characteristics that can create a good and useful learning experience for online students. Allen and Seaman (2017) found that of all students taking one online class, practically half are taking just online classes and while the vast majority of these online courses and projects are offered by several schools. Several factors need to be considered when accommodating the varying needs of online learners such as learning styles and the socio-economics of the online learner, moral issues intrinsic in online guidance; and systems for online guidance through the investigation of viable online systems (Oliver & Herrington, 2001). There has been relatively greater emphasis on preparing and providing support to academic staff and course designers to transition to online learning modes. However, the learners, on the other hand, have been expected to transition from the traditional way of learning to online learning with minimum support.

The objectives of this study were to get the views and experiences of learners studying online at USP and to stimulate reflections on course design features that are learner focused and enhances online learning experiences.

Methodology

An online survey was employed for data collection for this study using Survey Monkey paid

subscription. Survey monkey was chosen because of its analytics and anonymity of survey participants to meet the data collection ethics requirement at USP. The online survey link was shared on the Moodle course page for three generic online courses taken by all USP students.

The online survey aimed to measure the learners' experiences and views towards the design features used in the three courses they were enrolled in. The design features comprised of Course Navigation, Visual Design/Stimuli, Multimedia, eLearning Assessments, Feedback system, Supplementary links to online resources, Technology and Moodle tools for interaction. The online survey was conducted in the second half of the semester over 4 weeks and administered once for the purpose of this research

The online survey questions were adopted from the Australasian Council on Open, Distance, and e-Learning (ACODE) Threshold Standards 2017. These threshold standards serve as a guide for online learning environments and is relevant to courses with an online component associated to them or as prescribed by the institutional policies. This checklist assists in maintaining consistency and quality of online course development and design.

A Likert scale was used to measure participants' opinions using the online questionnaire. Likert scales are useful when you are measuring latent constructs - that is, characteristics of people such as attitudes, feelings, opinions, etc. This method was chosen as the questions were specific to the research topic and where required follow-up open-ended questions were used to collect detailed participants' opinions.

Online Survey Questionnaire

The online survey questionnaire comprised of 18 questions (16 closed questions out of which 4 questions had follow-up open-ended questions; and two open-ended questions). The questions ranged from demographic questions to specific online design elements in the courses.

The survey questions were not of a sensitive nature and were aimed to find out students' experience studying in an online environment and what design features helped in their learning.

The first set of questions focused on consents and demographics; courses the participants enrolled in, gender, studying on or off-campus, and if they had taken a prior online course. The second set of survey questions were multipart, with questions asking to rate their beliefs on the design of the course such as the course outline, the resources available during the class, the usability perspective, and having the course content clearly indicated. These survey questions required rating from strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

Sample

Students enrolled in three online courses were invited to participate in the online survey. The courses are pseudo named as courses A, B, and C to maintain confidentiality. Course A and B are 100 level while course C is 200 level course. The students were provided with the participant information and details of the research and for their consent to participate in the study. Students were also given the option to opt-out at any stage of the survey. In an attempt to gather as much data as possible, students were given a prize incentive to encourage participation in the online survey. To maintain student anonymity, a separate link was given to enter the draw to win prizes once the survey had been completed. A total of 75 students voluntarily opted to participate in the survey.

The survey data obtained from survey monkey was downloaded and basic statistical analysis such as mean values and frequencies of the responses were calculated to represent the views of the

participants. A word cloud was generated using Survey Monkey to determine student views on online learning. Thematic analysis was used to categorize data from the surveys into themes and are represented in the form of figures and tables in the results section. ANOVA was carried out to determine differences in student opinions between the courses. The results were analysed collectively for all three courses and from the 14 different campuses to understand the views regarding online learning. The differences in student views between campuses were beyond the scope of the current study.

Results

Learner's background

A total of 75 Students from 14 different campuses participated in the survey on student experiences. The respondents were enrolled in courses A (64%), B (22%), C (8%) and a small percentage (6%) of the respondents were simultaneously enrolled in other online courses at USP. The respondents included 55% females, 39% males and 7% did not disclose their gender. Most of the participants (59%) were taking their first online course at USP.

Students' views on the online learning experience and expectations

Positive online student experience included greater interest as it is a new way of learning; improved the learners' knowledge on how to research and collect information from different sources for assignments; and also helped with development of ICT skills (Figure 1). It also offered greater flexibility, course materials and information including assignments and due dates were made available at the beginning of the semester. Students also benefitted from regular and timely feedback on assignments and discussions with the course coordinators and fellow students through peer interactions online. In the follow-up question to the students who indicated that they had prior experience in online learning, students shared that studying online helped them to become independent learners and manage their time effectively.



Figure 1: Word cloud of responses on student expectations from the online course

The majority of off-campus students indicated that they encountered difficulty following the notes and completing activities due to poor network connectivity, which made it difficult to access course materials and complete activities on time. Both on-campus and off-campus students found it difficult to submit assignments online as this is something they were not familiar with.

Some of the comments from students when asked what could be improved in the design of their courses for future offer were as follows:

“Include more eMentoring sessions”

“Find some other application to deliver eMentoring session”

“Upgrade the computers in the Labs and improve internet connection”

“Make the video tutorials livelier”

Overall, students indicated that studying online courses at USP was relatively more difficult than studying a face-to-face course.

There was no significant difference (0.249) in the students' beliefs between the courses and within the course (Table 1).

Table 1: Perceptions relayed by the participants in the survey

ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1711.058	3	570.353	1.451	.249
Within Groups	11007.817	28	393.136		
Total	12718.875	31			

Tools for online interaction

Forums allowed easy interaction with instructors and peers providing a virtual space to ask questions and share knowledge related to the course. The lesson tool gave flexibility to students, allowing them to refer to and revisit information on activities. It also helped with understanding concepts before moving onto the next topic. The chat function provided synchronous feedback when used during agreed online consultation hours and was quicker. The most popular learning tools in Moodle (Figure 2) in descending order were forum (75%), lesson (71.8%), database (43.8%), chat (40.6%), workshop (37.5%), and quickmail (34.4%). A small percentage (3%) of the students selected “Other tools” which included receiving course information and updates in the student email accounts. These were sent directly by the unit coordinators from their staff email accounts to the student email accounts. One participant commented:

“I felt connected to the course when my Unit coordinator sent emails about important updates or additional support to my student email account. I felt that I was given extra attention since I was not very chatty and an average student in the online environment like other students”

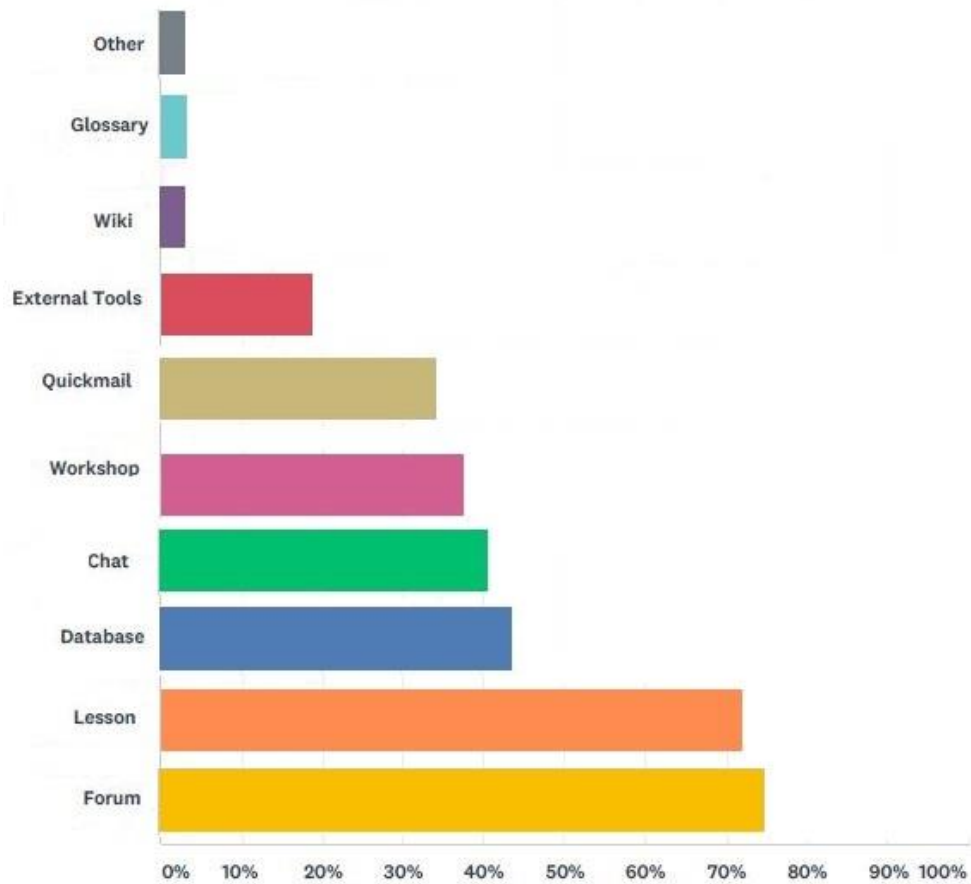


Figure 2: Popular Moodle online tools for interaction

Tools for Assessment and Assessment Feedback

The most popular Assessment tools in Moodle (Figure 3) in descending order were Quiz (58%), Assignment (52%), Lesson (30%), Marksheet (21%), Forum (18%) and Workshop (6%). It was also noted that 3% of the participants selected “Other tools” for assessment which was peer support provided while reading the discussions. One of the participants stated:

“While I did not interact much in discussions or unassessed activities, I learned a lot from my peers by just reading their postings and most of my questions regarding the assignments were clarified that way”

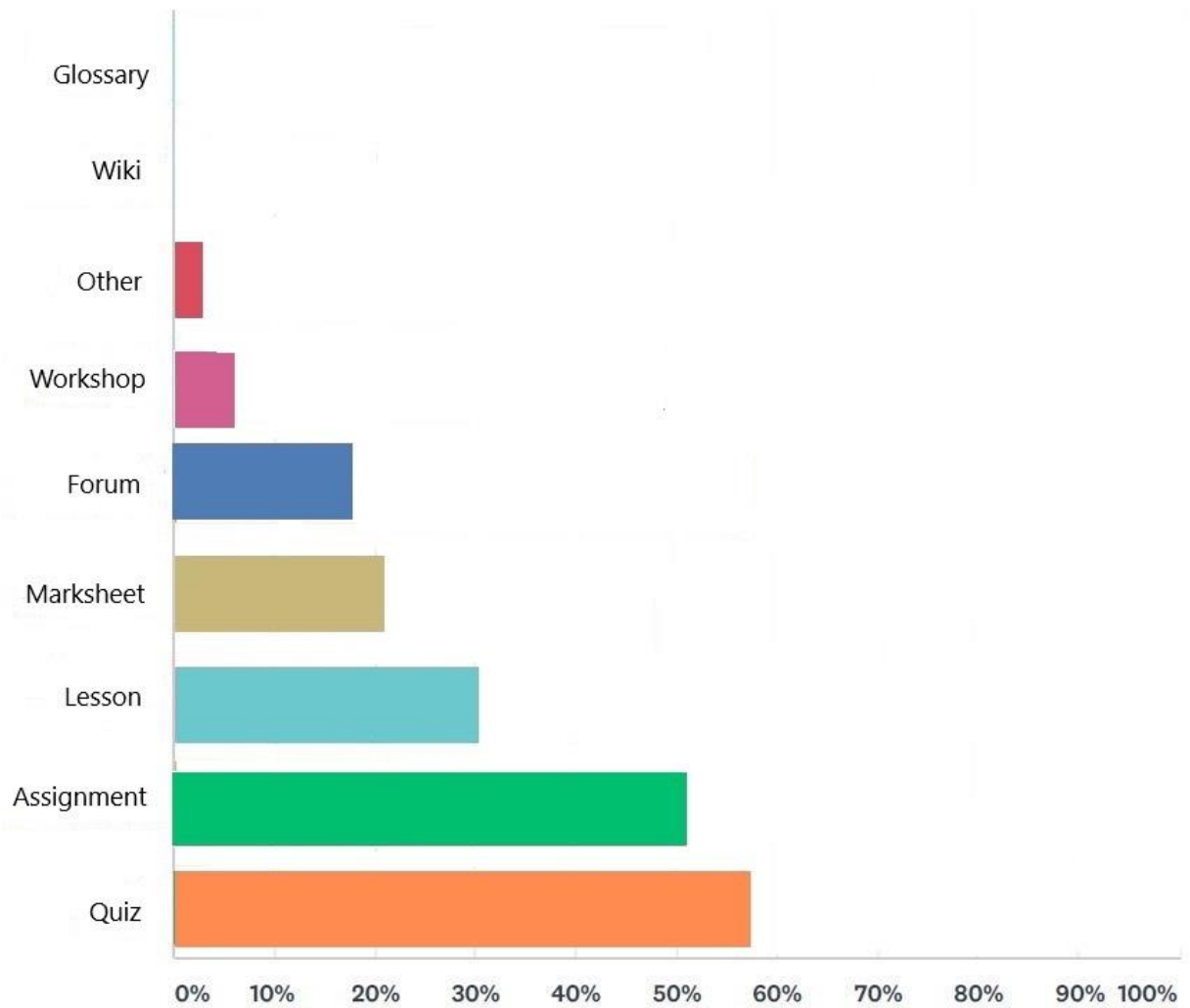


Figure 3: Popular Moodle Assessment Tools

The majority (81%) of students indicated that they were satisfied with the overall course design features in their courses while a relatively small percentage (8%) were not satisfied with the course design. The course materials being readily available (24/7) and the variety of resources were most useful to the students. As shown in Table 2, (88%) were satisfied with how the course outline was presented and made accessible. 79% of the students found it easy to navigate through the course while 83% of the students found the multimedia part of their course materials as useful to their learning. In addition, students were able to use the multimedia resources and the formats available were user friendly.

While 89% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that the use Visual design/Stimuli was used in their courses to capture their interest, the Technology on the other hand, had 61% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that it was readily available or the purpose of using external technology was clearly explained. 88% of the students were satisfied with the various e-

learning Assessments in their courses. However, a relatively smaller number of students (65%) were satisfied with the timeframe within which assessment feedback was provided to them.

Table 2: Summary of students' views on online course design features (N=75)

	Strongly Agree (SA)	Agree (A)	Neither agree nor disagree (N)	Disagree (D)	Strongly Disagree (SD)	No response
1. Course Outline	47%	41%	11%	2%	-	-
2. Navigation	37%	42%	12%	3%	-	-
3. Visual Design/Stimuli	52%	37%	4%	6%	-	2%
4. Relevant Multimedia	49%	34%	16%	-	-	-
5. E-learning Assessments	39%	49%	4%	5%	-	1%
6. Feedback System	38%	29%	21%	8%	3%	1%
7. Supplementary links to online resources	45%	46%	4%	5%	-	-
8. Technology	19%	42%	15%	6%	-	18%
Total mean	41%	40%	11%	5%	3%	6%

Discussion

The expectations of higher education students are shifting from the traditional way of learning to a complex way of learning due to the growing demand for online learning. Students who wish to be successful in an online environment often consider the appropriate communication tools used in the course and ease of navigation to be a necessary learning need (Graetz, 2006; Smart & Cappel, 2006).

The majority of learners (81%) were satisfied with the design and delivery of the online courses at USP. The use of online learning environments is increasing gradually and multimedia tools enrich the delivery of course contents. According to Mayer and Moreno (2002), multimedia instructional messages involving words (such as spoken or written text) and pictures (such as animation, video, illustrations, photographs) promote quality learning and helps cater for diverse learning styles among students. This is important considering the

diverse nature of students at USP coming from different cultural, socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. Students enrolled in online courses are not concerned with the design of the learning management system; all they want is to have access to all the learning resources and learning experience they want (Raskin, 2000).

It has been found that the integration of visual elements into audio in dialogues and lessons typically increases student performance (Hamdan & Al-Hawamdeh, 2018; Lee & Mayer, 2015; Safarali & Hamidi, 2012). Using audio and videos to support their learning was particularly useful to 75-93% of the students. Visual advantages of video provide a platform for and access to practical presentations, enabling students to learn from field experts by being provided with the opportunity to watch close-up expert examples and to display them regularly if appropriate (Cooper & Higgins, 2015; Ramlogan et al., 2014).

Visual design and stimuli aspects (illustrations, photography, typography, space, layouts, and aesthetic appeal) of the online courses were highly rated. Students agreed that font size was appropriate, relevant and visually appealing. However, 6-10% of the students suggested that images and multimedia files could be improved.

Most of the respondents were satisfied with the design of the course, despite taking online courses for the first time. However, it is important to note that approximately 20% of the respondents stayed neutral. Those who engage in teaching and learning notice the variability in the pace and manner in which they obtain fresh data and thoughts from their learners. A major advantage of online learning is that materials are available to students and gives greater flexibility to engage with the learning materials at a suitable pace. For example, students can view videos to their preference such as pause and reflect on content which helps with their learning. Literature also suggests that scheduling training to adapt to individual learning should produce enhanced learner results (Coffield et al., 2004).

Online learners are looking for a learning experience that suits their learning styles. Some of these aspects are ease of navigation, appropriate use of multimedia, visual design, eLearning assessments, supplementary resources, technology, and online tools utilised for interaction to accommodate the learning styles of the online learners. Literature from the past 50 years reflects that there is an ongoing debate surrounding the efficacy of learning styles and the impact on learning outcomes. While ample literature exists on learning styles and learning preferences that guide tailor-made teaching approaches to meet learner preferences, there is a small percentage of research on online learning environments (Gülbahar & Alper, 2014). Learning styles and learner preferences is an area that needs to be given more consideration given that the learners are the biggest clients and if the design of the online courses is not meeting their preferences, then the design is setting them to either opt-out or fail (Young & Norgard, 2006).

According to the results, providing enough opportunities for student-to-content, student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction is important for learners in an online course. Because of the physical separation imposed by the Web-based learning environment, a dialogue among students and a dialogue between students and the instructor are critically important to reduce any misunderstandings between students and an instructor (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). There are many reasons online learners do not interact or participate in online learning platforms. Some reasons are lack of ICT skills and assistance available (Henwood, 2000), limited or no access to computers and the internet (Kirkup, 2001; Selwyn, 1998).

Students found discussion forums very useful and contributed in different ways to their learning. While forums promote interactions between student-to-student and student-to-instructor, Lesson allows interaction between student-to-content. Chat and Database tools also seemed to be the second most popular choice for interaction. While Chat allows synchronous communication, Database allows students to participate online to create, maintain a search bank of record entries. This particularly encourages students to create their content as they progress through the course. The selection of appropriate interactive tools will attract and encourage students to appreciate and use them to interact with the instructor, content and online course mates. As stated by Rovai (2002), this is linked to greater satisfaction with the academic program and a reduced feeling of isolation.

Assessment is another major feature of online courses and if not designed appropriately can lead to poor student satisfaction. While there are some similarities between face-to-face and online education assessment practises, there are many distinctions in method, emphasis, and technological advantages and challenges (Xu & Mahenthiran, 2016). One of the major difference between a traditional assessment and an online assessment is the implementation of the assessment principles in an online environment. According to Faber et al. (2017), formative e-learning assessment is used to gather evidence of students' online learning achievement. The focus of these assessments is to provide input to teachers and students to enhance assignments provided to online learners. According to Thurlow et al. (2008), online assessments are more effective than traditional assessments as it allows the instructor to reach vast number of students easily and effectively and provide timely feedback. The majority of students were satisfied with the Assessment items in their online courses.

Contrary to this, feedback to Assessments did not receive such a high response. The lack of clear timeframes for feedback on assessments or forum postings was identified as an area which needs improvement. Providing timely and comprehensive feedback to students especially in an online course is very important to keep them engaged with the course. Assessment tasks are set not just to measure a learning outcome but to help students to test their knowledge and identify the areas that need to improve. Feedback should also be used as a form of encouragement and guidance by the instructors to the learners with the intension to enhance learning (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008; Stull et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The majority of learners were satisfied with the overall online learning experience at USP. The online courses provided opportunities for greater interaction, clear assessment instructions, and timely feedback. There is an expectation from the learners that the specifics of online learning will undergo substantial change as the technology for online learning advances. The design and delivery of the online courses met the expectations of students at USP. The biggest change for learners is learning how to study online and training is necessary especially for students taking online courses for the first time. Consequently, the institution should have the infrastructure that supports the smooth running of the online courses so that the learners are not affected at any stage of their study programme. These changes are neither easy for the institution nor the learners, but the learners also have a huge role to play and that is to take ownership of their learning as they slowly shift their learning strategies to suit online learning.

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