



Student Engagement and Feedback on Online Learning and Facilitation: A Case Study of the National Open University of Nigeria


Engagement des étudiants et le feedback sur l'apprentissage en ligne et la facilitation: Une étude de cas de l'Université Nationale Ouverte du Nigeria


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Abstract

With the rapid adoption of online learning platforms occasioned by the rise in digital technologies, the National Open University of Nigeria has continued to leverage technology to optimise operations by offering synchronous online facilitation/tutoring to students as part of its regular academic support initiatives. Online facilitation happens every semester of the academic session. However, since the commencement of online facilitation in 2020, there has been no research report assessing student engagement. Thus, this study was designed to survey students' online learning experience and gather feedback on various aspects of synchronous online facilitation including participation, satisfaction, barriers, and challenges faced during the virtual learning journey. 2,350 students took part in this study. The survey questionnaire was administered online, featuring a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. A majority of students (61.9%) reported participating in the first semester of the 2023 facilitation sessions and expressed satisfaction with their online learning experience, but that more awareness and effective communication strategies are needed to enhance the process. The non-participation rate of 38.1% was attributed to various reasons, with the most common being workloads and personal

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commitments, unsuitable timetables, financial constraints, limited internet connectivity, and a lack of responsiveness from facilitators in some courses. It is important for NOUN to address these issues by providing more flexible timetables, exploring options for reducing facilitation costs, and ensuring students have access to stable internet connections to improve their engagement in online facilitations. Addressing these challenges can lead to more successful and fulfilling online learning experiences for students.

Keywords: *Student engagement, feedback, online facilitation, online learning, NOUN*

Résumé

Avec l'adoption rapide des plates-formes d'apprentissage en ligne due à l'essor des technologies numériques, l'Université Nationale Ouverte du Nigeria a continué à tirer parti de la technologie pour optimiser ses opérations en offrant aux étudiants des services de facilitation/tutorat en ligne dans le cadre de ses initiatives régulières de soutien académique. La facilitation en ligne a lieu chaque semestre de la session universitaire. Cependant, depuis le début de la facilitation en ligne en 2020, aucun rapport de recherche n'a été publié sur les études visant à déterminer l'engagement des étudiants. Cette étude a donc été conçue pour étudier l'expérience d'apprentissage en ligne des étudiants et recueillir des commentaires sur divers aspects de la facilitation en ligne, de l'animation en ligne synchrone, notamment sur les perceptions, la participation, la satisfaction, les obstacles et les défis rencontrés au cours du voyage d'apprentissage virtuel. 2,350 étudiants ont suivi cette étude. Le questionnaire de l'enquête a été administré en ligne et comportait un mélange de questions fermées et ouvertes. Des statistiques descriptives ont été utilisées pour analyser les données quantitatives, tandis qu'une approche d'analyse thématique a été appliquée pour examiner les réponses aux questions ouvertes de l'enquête. Une majorité d'étudiants (61,9 %) ont déclaré avoir participé aux sessions de facilitation du premier semestre 2023 et se sont dits satisfaits de leur expérience d'apprentissage en ligne, tout en soulignant qu'une plus grande sensibilisation et des stratégies de communication efficaces étaient nécessaires pour améliorer le processus. Le taux de non-participation de 38,1 % a été attribué à diverses raisons, les facteurs les plus courants étant la charge de travail et les engagements personnels, les horaires inadaptés, les contraintes financières, la connectivité Internet limitée et le manque de réactivité des facilitateurs dans certains cours. Il est important que NOUN s'attaque à ces problèmes en proposant des horaires plus souples, en explorant les possibilités de réduire les coûts de facilitation et en veillant à

ce que les étudiants aient accès à une connexion Internet stable afin d'améliorer leur engagement dans les facilitations en ligne. Relever ces défis peut conduire à une expérience d'apprentissage en ligne plus réussie et plus satisfaisante pour les étudiants.

Mots-clés: *Engagement des étudiants, retour d'information, facilitation en ligne, apprentissage en ligne, NOUN*

Introduction

The education landscape has witnessed a series of transformations, with the increasing adoption of synchronous online learning platforms and virtual facilitation methods occasioned by the rise of digital technologies. As a result of the unprecedented changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), an open distance learning institution, moved to switch their courses to online formats by providing open and distance learning (ODL) services through technology-enabled processes to support student engagement in learning. As a single-mode ODL institution, NOUN accommodates a huge student population and the wide spread of students in terms of their location and diversity has led to increased use of technology to improve the interaction with and service delivery to students. Consequently, NOUN has continued to leverage technology to optimise its operations by offering online facilitation/tutoring to students as part of its regular academic support initiatives.

Synchronous online facilitation being one of the instructional delivery strategies of the University happens every first and second semester of the academic session. The online facilitation exercise of the 2023_1 semester took place from the 27th of February 2023 to the 1st of May 2023. NOUN has a very rich approach to course content delivery to students which includes printed course materials, online course resources, and instructional videos hosted on a Learning Management System (LMS). The course materials are the vital tools used in instructional delivery and facilitation (Ofoha, 2013). Synchronous online facilitation offers the opportunity for students to engage with

facilitators on the course materials. The facilitation process encompasses the following components: the creation of a facilitation plan, which outlined the desired lesson outcomes and comprehensive course content details to be covered over the eight weeks; and conducting one-hour live sessions every week, which include summaries, student interactions, problem-solving, and demonstrations. All sessions are recorded and stored in the cloud, and the corresponding links to these recorded sessions are made available on the LMS course page of each student for the benefit of those who could not attend the sessions and for review by those who attended. In addition, facilitators are strongly encouraged to utilise discussion forums and quizzes to enhance student interaction and engagement.

The synchronous online facilitation exercise commenced in 2020 following the COVID-19 lockdowns and has since continued to play a vital role in NOUN's instructional delivery processes. It has been observed that NOUN is the leading ODL University, providing synchronous online facilitation in Nigeria, with other Institutions looking up to it for training and mentorship in online facilitation processes (Owolabi & Adeyinka, 2022). According to Adeshina (2020), Synchronous online facilitation in NOUN provides a veritable platform for the seamless delivery of instructional content, ensuring flexibility in the instructional process as lecturers can easily interact with students anytime, anywhere through the learning management system.

Despite the high rate of NOUN's involvement in online education and acquisition of relevant resources to ensure seamless facilitation, and since the commencement of online facilitation in 2020 (in replacement of the face-to-face mode of facilitation), no research has been conducted to gauge students' levels of engagement and perceptions in synchronous online learning facilitation. An understanding of the benefits and concerns as perceived by the student population is essential to implementing an online education environment that is conducive to a student's learning. It is in a bid to fill this gap in knowledge that this study was conducted to obtain feedback from students on various aspects of synchronous *online facilitation* in NOUN.

Students are the most important part of any ODL teaching-learning environment and one of the primary stakeholders in the system. The importance of student feedback has been widely acknowledged in the research literature. Generally, student feedback is very crucial, especially in this age of online learning, and is regarded as an essential element in improving the learning process of the students (Mamoon-Al-Bashi., Rezaul Kabi., & Rahman, 2016). Research shows feedback to be an indispensable tool that can be used to identify what is working well, as well as any barriers or gaps that can be further addressed, which can improve teaching and learning effectiveness and increase student engagement, motivation, retention, and success. By collecting feedback, universities and online course designers can discover the extent to which they are meeting the needs of their students and addressing any concerns they may have, especially when the results are integrated into the institution's decision-making processes, as failure to do so can create a dissonance that impedes future engagement (Explorance, 2023).

Student engagement is considered an essential element of a student's learning experience and plays a pivotal role in student success (Li & Xue, 2023). While many studies have extensively researched student engagement in face-to-face environments, fewer studies have explored the factors influencing student engagement in synchronous online learning environments, from the students' perspectives. Moreover, most of the research on student engagement in online learning has focused either on the role of student-instructor interaction (Alghamdi, Alyousif, AlQarni, et al. 2024), administrative issues (Ray, Bala, & Dwivedi, 2020), or factors relating to course structure, interpersonal interaction and academic resources (Hollister, Nair, Hill-Lindsay & Chukoskie, 2022). Therefore, the current research aims to explore the various aspects of synchronous online facilitation to understand factors influencing student engagement and participation in synchronous online learning as perceived by students and gather valuable feedback to inform future pedagogical strategies and improvements. The research questions for this investigation are as follows:

- How do NOUN students perceive their synchronous online learning experience?
- What is the participation rate in the synchronous online facilitation exercise of the 2023_1 semester?
- What are the barriers to student participation in synchronous online learning and facilitation?
- How do NOUN students rate their satisfaction and experience of participating in the synchronous online facilitation exercise of the 2023_1 semester?
- What are the challenges NOUN students face during synchronous online learning and facilitation?
- What are some of the strategies that can be employed to improve the quality of synchronous online learning in NOUN?

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in data collection and analysis. The study's sample comprised 2,350 students randomly selected from the diverse cohort of active students enrolled in the 2023_1 semester across the eight faculties of the university. The study utilised an online survey questionnaire to gather responses from these students. The survey instrument comprised a range of 40 questions including demographic information, designed to elicit relevant information on the subject of enquiry. It was organised into four sub-sections; Section A dealt with student perceptions of synchronous online learning; Section B asked questions assessing student participation rates in synchronous online facilitation; Section C was structured to identify the barriers to synchronous online learning and participation, that is, the reasons for non-participation at the facilitation sessions. Section D assessed the satisfaction levels and experiences of students who participated in the 2023_1 synchronous online facilitation exercise, and Section E had two open-ended questions to obtain qualitative data. The link to the survey was placed prominently on the Virtual Learning Environment where students were encouraged to participate in providing valuable feedback. The survey instrument was open for 10 weeks, from April 24 to June 29, 2023. A five-point Likert scale was used in sections B, C and D, where each item is associated with five

response options that represent varying degrees of agreement or disagreement. The responses are divided into five categories ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree. In addition to the Likert questions, two open-ended questions were asked to obtain qualitative data which could provide deeper insights into specific areas of concern and challenges faced during the virtual learning journey and recommendations from the participants on how to improve the quality of online learning. The items of the questionnaire were content validated through expert judgment. All the items demonstrated good reliability with Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 obtained. A total of 2350 students completed the online feedback questionnaire.

Descriptive analysis (frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviation) was used to analyse the quantitative data. The cut-off point for the mean scores was set at 3.0. This was obtained by adding the scale values and dividing by 5 (i.e. $5+4+3+2+1=15/5=3$). Hence, any item with a mean rating of 3.0 or above was considered high, indicating that respondents generally leaned towards agreement with the statement while any item with a mean rating below 3.0 was regarded as low, suggesting that the level of agreement was low with the statement. For the qualitative part of the survey, a thematic analysis approach was applied to examine the responses from the open-ended questions in the survey and the findings presented in the narrative form.

Findings and Discussion

1.1 Feedback on Perceptions of Students Regarding Online Learning and Synchronous Facilitation

The data obtained from the analysis of students' responses on perceptions regarding online learning are presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Descriptive Analysis of Students' Responses to Perceptions of Online Learning*

SN	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1	The online learning platform is user-friendly and easy to navigate	669 (28.47%)	1396 (59.4%)	150 (6.38%)	111 (4.72%)	24 (1.02%)	4.1	0.79
2	I have access to the necessary materials I need for online study	656 (27.91%)	1223 (52.04%)	189 (8.04%)	222 (9.45%)	60 (2.55%)	3.93	0.98
3	I have access to the necessary technology and resources for successful online learning	481 (20.47%)	1310 (55.74%)	272 (11.57%)	244 (10.38%)	43 (1.83%)	3.83	0.93
4	I have experienced technical issues or problems that have affected my online learning experience.	466 (19.83%)	902 (38.38%)	263 (11.19%)	623 (26.51%)	96 (4.09%)	3.43	1.19
5	I have difficulty managing my time and staying organised during online learning.	259 (11.02%)	795 (33.83%)	371 (15.79%)	787 (33.49%)	138 (5.87%)	3.11	1.16

Note (1 = strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

Table 1 shows the data analysis on students' perceptions regarding online learning. A detailed item-by-item analysis is presented, to highlight key findings and trends that emerged from the students' responses, which are as follows:

Q1: The online learning platform is user-friendly and easy to navigate

Based on the provided responses to the question "The online learning platform was user-friendly and easy to navigate," Strongly Agree and Agree were considered positive responses, and together they accounted for 87.87% of the total responses. This indicates that the majority of participants were satisfied with the online learning platform's user-friendliness and navigation. The mean score is 4.1, which is above the threshold limit of 3.0, indicating that, on average, the respondents leaned towards agreement with the statement. The findings support existing research that identifies user-friendliness and ease of navigation of online platforms as key factors required for successful online learning (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020; Kedia & Mishra, 2023).

Q2: I have access to the necessary materials I need for online study

This question was asked to investigate the perceptions regarding the online study materials. The positive responses (Strongly Agree 27.91%) and (Agree 52.04%) accounted for 79.95% of the total responses. Based on the item result, a significant number of participants (79.95%) felt they had access to the necessary materials needed for online study. However, 12% had negative sentiments to the question and 8% were neutral. The mean score is 3.93, indicating that, on average, the respondents leaned towards agreement with the statement. The findings corroborate existing research highlighting the importance of course materials for successful online learning (Kedia & Mishra, 2023).

Q3: I have access to the necessary technology and resources for successful Synchronous online learning

The percentage of positive responses: Strongly Agree (20.47%) and Agree (55.74%) is 76.21% while the percentage of negative responses:

Disagree (10.38%) and Strongly Disagree (1.83%) is 12.21%. Neutral responses stood at 11.57%. Data obtained from Table 1 revealed that a significant number of participants felt they had access to the necessary technology and resources for successful online learning, with approximately 76% expressing positive sentiments. The mean score is 3.83, indicating that, on average, the respondents leaned towards agreement with the statement. The findings support existing research which holds that access to technology and resources is an important factor for successful online learning (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020).

Q4: I have experienced technical issues or problems that have affected my Synchronous online learning experience

Percentage of positive responses: Strongly Agree and Agree = 58.21%. Percentage of Negative Responses: Disagree + Strongly Disagree = 30.60%. Percentage of Neutral Responses: Neutral: 11.19%. Based on the survey results, many participants have experienced technical issues or problems that have affected their online learning experience, with approximately 58% expressing this concern. The mean score is 3.43, indicating that, on average, the respondents leaned towards agreement with the statement.

Addressing technical issues in online learning can be crucial to enhancing the overall learning experience. By understanding the specific problems students are facing, NOUN can work to improve the technical infrastructure and support services to ensure a smoother and more effective online learning environment.

Q1(5): I have difficulty managing my time and staying organised during online learning

Percentage of Positive Responses: Strongly Agree and Agree = 44.85%. Percentage of Negative Responses: Disagree + Strongly Disagree = 39.36% Percentage of Neutral Responses: Neutral: 15.79%. As indicated in Table 1, almost half of the participants who took part in the study experienced difficulty managing their time and staying organised during online learning, with approximately 45% expressing this concern. The mean score is 3.11, which is above the threshold limit of 3.0, indicating that, on average, the respondents leaned towards

agreement with the statement. To support learners in improving their time management and organisational skills during the online learning period, NOUN may use student feedback to inform instructional adjustments by offering resources, workshops, and personalised support to help students develop effective study habits and strategies. Addressing these challenges can lead to a more successful and fulfilling online learning experience for students. The findings corroborate existing research that time management and staying organised as key factors required for successful online learning (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020; Kedia & Mishra, 2023).

1.2 Participation in Online Facilitation

Among respondents, this question sought to determine participation rates in the online facilitation exercise of the 2023_1 semester.

O: Did you participate in Synchronous Online Facilitation in the 2023_1 Semester?

Table 2

Participation in Online Facilitation in 2023_1 Semester

Yes	1,454 (61.9%)
No	896 (38.1%)

Based on the responses in Table 2, a significant number (61.9%) of the respondents reported participating in synchronous online facilitation during the 2023_1 semester. This suggests that synchronous online facilitation activities were actively utilised by a majority of the participants during that time. However, the non-participation rate (38.1%) indicates that a considerable number of respondents did not engage in synchronous online facilitation.

It is essential to understand the reasons behind both participation and non-participation to identify potential factors that influenced these choices. This information can be valuable for NOUN and facilitators to assess the effectiveness of online facilitation methods and make improvements or adjustments as needed to better support learners'

needs and preferences. Some of these factors are being investigated in the following subsections.

1.3 Investigation of Possible Factors Leading to Non-Participation in Online Facilitation

Respondents who did not participate in the facilitation exercise of the 2023_1 semester were further probed to investigate factors that might have caused this. A total of 896 participants were in this category and their responses are reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Responses from Students who did not Participate in the 2023 1 Facilitation (N = 896)

SN	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1	I did not participate in online facilitation because I did not have access to the necessary device(s) i.e. smartphone, laptop or desktop.	47 (5.25%)	129 (14.4%)	142 (15.85%)	430 (47.99%)	148 (16.52%)	2.44	1.09
2	I did not participate in online facilitation because I did not have access to an internet connection.	61 (6.81%)	170 (18.97%)	117 (13.06%)	395 (44.08%)	61 (6.81%)	2.54	1.17
3	The timings for the online facilitation sessions were not suitable for me	247 (27.57%)	348 (38.84%)	112 (12.5%)	146 (16.29%)	43 (4.8%)	3.68	1.18
4	My workload or other personal commitments prevent me from participating in the online facilitation sessions	365 (40.74%)	234 (26.12%)	95 (10.6%)	146 (16.29%)	56 (6.25%)	3.79	1.3
5	I consider attending online facilitation sessions expensive.	44 (4.91%)	131 (14.62%)	253 (28.24%)	337 (37.61%)	128 (14.29%)	2.58	1.06

6	I do not consider the live facilitation sessions relevant to my learning needs	27 (3.01%)	81 (9.04%)	111 (12.39%)	441 (49.22%)	236 (26.34%)	2.13	1.00
7	I have attended online facilitation before and the lack of availability and responsiveness of the facilitator impacted my decision not to participate in online facilitation.	61 (6.81%)	115 (12.83%)	180 (20.09%)	405 (45.2%)	135 (15.07%)	2.51	1.1
8	I did not participate in online facilitation because I did not find it engaging or interesting	41 (4.56%)	91 (10.12%)	122 (13.57%)	481 (53.50%)	154 (17.13%)	2.3	1.02
9	The lack of interaction with peers impacts my decision not to participate in the online facilitation sessions.	43 (4.8%)	133 (14.84%)	148 (16.52%)	443 (49.44%)	129 (14.4%)	2.46	1.06
10	Overall, I was satisfied with the online learning	113 (12.61%)	380 (42.41%)	235 (26.23%)	116 (12.95%)	52 (5.8%)	3.43	1.05

Note (1 = strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

The analysis of data as presented in Table 3 shows there are a variety of reasons why some students did not participate in the 2023_1 online facilitation sessions. A detailed analysis for each reason is outlined below:

Q1: I did not participate in online facilitation because I did not have access to the necessary device(s) i.e., smartphone, laptop or desktop

Reason for Non-Participation: Lack of access to necessary device(s)

As seen in Table 3, a relatively small percentage (about 20%) of the respondents reported facing difficulties in participating in online facilitation due to a lack of access to necessary devices (smartphone, laptop, or desktop). The mean (2.44) and standard deviation (1.09) indicate that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately low, suggesting that the majority of respondents did not experience such challenges.

However, it is essential to address the needs of the respondents who reported difficulties in accessing devices, as this can have a significant impact on their learning opportunities. Providing support and solutions to help them gain access to necessary devices or alternative learning methods can help enhance their learning experience. Additionally, understanding the reasons behind the neutral responses (16%) may also be valuable in identifying potential areas for improvement in device accessibility and online facilitation strategies.

Q2: I did not participate in synchronous online facilitation because I did not have access to an internet connection

Reason for Non-Participation: Lack of access to an internet connection.

Data from Table 3 revealed that a significant percentage (25.78%) of the respondents reported facing difficulties in participating in synchronous online facilitation due to a lack of access to an internet connection. The mean (2.54) and standard deviation (1.17) indicate that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately low, suggesting that the majority of respondents did not experience such challenges.

It is essential to address the needs of the respondents who reported difficulties in accessing the internet connection, as this barrier can significantly hinder their synchronous online learning opportunities. Providing solutions and support to help them gain access to a stable internet connection or considering alternative learning methods can improve their experience. Additionally, understanding the reasons behind the neutral responses (13%) may also be valuable in identifying potential areas for improvement in internet accessibility and synchronous online facilitation strategies.

O3: The timings for the synchronous online facilitation sessions were not suitable for me

Reason for Non-Participation: Timings for online facilitation sessions were not suitable.

Based on the results, a significant percentage (around 66%) of the respondents reported facing difficulties in participating in synchronous online facilitation due to the session timings not being suitable for them. The mean (3.68) and standard deviation (1.18) indicate that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately high, suggesting that many respondents indeed encountered challenges with session timings.

Addressing timing issues is crucial for enhancing student engagement and participation in synchronous online facilitation. Although the sessions were recorded for the benefit of those who could not attend and for review, it may be helpful to conduct surveys to determine preferred timing options for students. By accommodating diverse schedules, NOUN can improve the overall learning experience and support a broader range of learners. Another possibility is to reduce the number of live sessions and encourage facilitators to engage more asynchronously with students.

O4: My workload or other personal commitments prevent me from participating in the synchronous online facilitation sessions

Reason for Non-Participation: Workload or other personal commitments prevent participation.

The results show that the Strongly Agree and Agree responses accounted for 66.41% of the total responses. Therefore, a significant proportion (66.41%) of the respondents reported facing difficulties in participating in online facilitation due to their workload or other personal commitments. The mean of 3.79 shows that the average agreement level is moderately high, indicating that, on average, respondents tended to agree that they faced workload or commitment-related issues.

The result is similar to the responses regarding non-participation due to unsuitable timings. To address these challenges, NOUN can seek out ways to provide flexible scheduling options and continue to provide recording sessions for asynchronous learning. By seeking out accommodating students' diverse commitments, NOUN can foster greater participation and support students in managing their workload effectively while pursuing their degree courses.

O5: I consider attending online facilitation sessions expensive

Reason for Non-attendance: Considering Synchronous Online Facilitation Sessions Expensive

Data obtained from Table 3 revealed that a relatively small percentage (19.53%) of the respondents considered online facilitation sessions expensive. The mean (2.58) and standard deviation (1.06) indicate that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately low, suggesting that the majority of respondents did not perceive online facilitation as an expensive option.

NOUN may consider communicating the benefits and value of synchronous online facilitation, including cost-effectiveness compared to traditional in-person learning alternatives to students. It may also be helpful to seek out ways to reduce the cost of students joining facilitation sessions. Addressing perceptions of expense and providing transparent information about the value of synchronous online facilitation can lead to increased participation and a positive learning experience for students.

O6: I do not consider the live facilitation sessions relevant to my learning needs

Reason for Non-Participation: Not Considering Live Facilitation Sessions Relevant

Based on the results, 12.05% of the respondents had concerns about the relevance of live facilitation sessions to their learning needs. The mean (2.13) and standard deviation (1.0) indicate that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately low, suggesting that the majority of respondents did not consider live facilitation as irrelevant to their learning needs. This result generally suggests that students considered the opportunity for online facilitation relevant to their learning. Addressing perceptions of relevance and tailoring the live facilitation approach can lead to improved engagement and better alignment with students' learning needs.

O7: I have attended synchronous online facilitation before, and the lack of availability and responsiveness of the facilitator impacted my decision not to participate in synchronous online facilitation

Reason for Non-Participation: The lack of availability and responsiveness of the facilitator impacted the decision.

The results in Table 3 show that 19.64% of the respondents expressed concerns about the lack of availability and responsiveness of the facilitators impacting their decision not to participate in synchronous online facilitation. The mean of 2.51 indicates that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately low, suggesting that, on average, respondents tended to disagree that facilitator availability and responsiveness affected their decision not to participate.

To address these concerns, NOUN can emphasise the importance of facilitators keeping to the advertised schedule as unresponsiveness leads to dissatisfied students. Encouraging timely communication and feedback can help enhance the facilitation experience and positively impact student participation in synchronous online sessions.

O8: I did not participate in synchronous online facilitation because I did not find it engaging or interesting

Reason for Non-Participation: Lack of engagement or interest in online facilitation

Based on the results as presented in Table 3, a relatively small proportion of respondents (14.68%) of respondents cited a lack of engagement or interest as a reason for not participating in synchronous online facilitation., suggesting that the majority of respondents did not consider a lack of engagement or interest as the primary reason for non-participation. The mean (2.3) and standard deviation (1.02) indicate that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately low, suggesting that the majority of respondents did not consider lack of engagement or interest as the primary reason for non-participation.

To address concerns related to engagement and interest, NOUN can focus on designing interactive and stimulating facilitation sessions. Utilising various teaching methods, incorporating more multimedia elements as planned, and promoting student interaction can make synchronous online facilitation sessions more engaging and interesting for learners.

O9: The lack of interaction with peers impacts my decision not to participate in the synchronous online facilitation sessions

Reason for Non-Participation: Lack of interaction with peers

The Table 3 results showed that 19.64% of the respondents cited a lack of interaction with peers as a reason for not participating in online facilitation. The mean (2.46) and standard deviation (1.06) indicate that the level of agreement on this issue is moderately low, suggesting that the majority of respondents did not consider lack of interaction with peers as the primary reason for non-participation.

To address concerns related to the lack of interaction with peers, NOUN can implement various strategies to promote peer collaboration and communication during online facilitation sessions. These may include group activities, discussion forums, virtual breakout sessions,

and team-based projects. By creating opportunities for meaningful interaction among students, we may be able to foster a sense of community and engagement, which can positively impact students' decision to participate in synchronous online facilitation sessions.

O10: Overall, I was satisfied with the online learning

Overall Satisfaction with Online Learning

It can be seen in Table 3 that 55.02% expressed satisfaction with their online learning experience, suggesting that, on average, respondents tended to be satisfied with online learning. The mean (3.43) and standard deviation (1.05) indicate that the level of satisfaction is moderately high, suggesting that, on average, respondents tended to be satisfied with online learning.

To further enhance the online learning experience, NOUN can continue to gather feedback from students, identify areas for improvement, and implement strategies to address any concerns or challenges. Providing additional resources, enhancing interactive elements, and promoting effective communication between students and facilitators can contribute to even higher levels of satisfaction with online learning.

1.3.1 Summary of findings on limitations of students attending facilitation

To analyse the responses and determine the most pressing reasons why students did not attend online facilitations, the Mean values for each reason were considered. The Mean indicates the average level of agreement/disagreement with each reason on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The higher the Mean value, the more significant the reason is for non-participation. Table 4 presents the mean for every reason.

Table 4

Reasons for Non-Participation in the 2023_1 facilitation Ranked by Means

Reasons for Non-Participation in Online Facilitation	Agree + Strongly Agree	Disagree + Strongly Disagree	Neutral	Mean	Rank
Workloads and personal commitment	66.86%	22.54%	10.60%	3.79	1 st
Timetable not suitable	66.41%	21.09%	12.50%	3.68	2 nd
Facilitation Expensive	19.53%	51.90%	28.24%	2.58	3 rd
Limited access to internet connection	25.78%	50.89%	13.06%	2.54	4 th
Non-responsiveness of facilitators	19.64%	60.27%	20.09%	2.51	5 th
Lack of interaction with peers	19.64%	63.84%	16.52%	2.46	6 th
Limited access to devices like smartphones laptops or desktop	19.65%	64.51%	15.85%	2.44	7 th
Sessions not interesting or engaging	14.68%	70.63%	13.57%	2.23	8 th
Irrelevance to student's learning needs	12.05%	75.56%	12.39%	2.13	9 th

Based on the Mean values, the most pressing reasons why students did not attend online facilitations were as follows:

1. Workloads and personal commitment - Mean: 3.79
2. Timetable not suitable - Mean: 3.68
3. Facilitation Expensive - Mean: 2.58
4. Limited access to an internet connection - Mean: 2.54
5. Non-responsiveness of facilitators - Mean: 2.51

The top two reasons with the highest Mean values were workloads and personal commitments and unsuitable timetables. These reasons indicate that students' busy schedules and conflicts with their other commitments are major factors contributing to their non-participation in online facilitations. The third and fourth reasons, the cost of the exercise and limited access to an internet connection, also played a significant role in hindering students' participation.

It's important for NOUN to address these issues by providing more flexible timetables, exploring options for reducing facilitation costs, and ensuring students have access to stable internet connections to

improve their engagement in online facilitation. Additionally, offering engaging and relevant content can help enhance students' motivation to participate in online sessions. Surprisingly, lack of access to devices was not considered a major limitation by the participants.

1.4 Investigation of the Experiences of Students Who Participated in the 2023_1 Online Facilitation Exercise

A total of 1,454 respondents indicated that they participated in the 2023_1 facilitation exercise. Table 5 presents their responses and descriptive statistics.

Table 5

Responses by Students Who Participated in the 2023_1 Online Facilitation (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

SN	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1	I am satisfied with the level of interaction I have with my instructor(s) in my online course(s)	309 (21.25%)	805 (55.36%)	176 (12.1%)	123 (8.46%)	41 (2.82%)	3.84	0.95
2	The online facilitator responded to questions and concerns on time.	373 (25.65%)	850 (58.46%)	155 (10.66%)	61 (4.2%)	15 (1.03%)	4.04	0.79
3	The online facilitator provided valuable feedback on assignments	254 (17.47%)	790 (54.33%)	239 (16.44%)	144 (9.9%)	27 (1.86%)	3.76	0.92
4	The online facilitator provided helpful resources and materials for the course	361 (24.83%)	865 (59.49%)	149 (10.25%)	69 (4.75%)	10 (0.69%)	4.03	0.78
5	The online facilitator encouraged active participation from all learners in the course.	501 (34.46%)	829 (57.02%)	80 (5.5%)	34 (2.34%)	10 (0.69%)	4.22	0.71

6	The online facilitator created a positive and inclusive learning environment.	402 (27.65%)	869 (59.77%)	120 (8.25%)	48 (3.3%)	15 (1.03%)	4.1	0.76
7	Overall, I was satisfied with the online facilitation in this course.	344 (23.66%)	815 (56.05%)	173 (11.9%)	98 (6.74%)	24 (1.65%)	3.93	0.88
8	I would recommend online learning and facilitation to others	538 (37%)	749 (51.51%)	123 (8.46%)	28 (1.93%)	16 (1.1%)	4.21	0.77

Q1: I am satisfied with the level of interaction I have with my instructor(s) in my online course(s)

As indicated in Table 5, the majority of respondents (76.61%) were "Satisfied" (Strongly Agree and Agree) with the level of interaction they have with their instructors in online facilitation. However, there is a small proportion (11.56%) of students who were "Neutral" or "Disagree" with the level of interaction, and a very small proportion (2.82%) "Strongly Disagree."

Q2: The online facilitator responded to questions and concerns on time

As shown in Table 5, a sizable number of respondents (84.11%) were "Satisfied" (Strongly Agree and Agree) with the online facilitator's timely response to their questions and concerns. A small proportion of students (10.66%) expressed "Neutral" feelings, while an insignificant percentage (5.23%) reported some level of dissatisfaction ("Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree") with the facilitator's responsiveness.

Q3: The online facilitators provided valuable feedback on assignments

Data obtained from Table 5 revealed that the majority of respondents (71.8%) are either "Satisfied" (Strongly Agree and Agree) with the online facilitator's feedback on assignments. However, a significant proportion of students (26.34%) expressed "Neutral" feelings and a smaller percentage (11.76%) reported some level of dissatisfaction ("Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree") with the facilitator's feedback.

Q4: The online facilitator provided helpful resources and materials for the course

Results of Table 5 showed that the majority of respondents (84.32%) were "Satisfied" (Strongly Agree and Agree) with the online facilitator's provision of helpful resources and materials. A smaller proportion of students (10.25%) expressed "Neutral" feelings and only a minority of students (5.44%) reported some level of dissatisfaction ("Disagree" + "Strongly Disagree") with the facilitator's resource provision.

O5: The online facilitator encouraged active participation from all learners in the course

Data obtained from Table 5 revealed that the majority of respondents (91.48%) were "Satisfied" (Strongly Agree + Agree) with the online facilitator's encouragement of active participation from all learners in the course. A smaller proportion of students (5.5%) expressed "Neutral" feelings and only a minority of students (2.34%) reported some level of disagreement ("Disagree" + "Strongly Disagree") with the facilitators' approach to encouraging participation.

O6: The online facilitator created a positive and inclusive learning environment.

Table 5 results showed that the majority of respondents (87.42%) were "Satisfied" (Strongly Agree and Agree) with the online facilitator's creation of a positive and inclusive learning environment. A smaller proportion of students (8.25%) expressed "Neutral" feelings and only a small percentage of students (4.33%) reported some level of disagreement ("Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree") with the facilitator's efforts to create an inclusive environment.

O7: Overall, I was satisfied with the online facilitation in this course

As seen in Table 5, A higher percentage of respondents (79.71%) were "Satisfied" (Strongly Agree + Agree) with the online facilitation in the course. A smaller proportion of students (11.9%) expressed "Neutral" feelings and only a minority of students (8.39%) reported some level of dissatisfaction ("Disagree" + "Strongly Disagree") with the facilitation.

O8: I would recommend online learning and facilitation to others

The survey responses overwhelmingly indicate that the majority of respondents would recommend online learning and facilitation to others. A combined 88.51% of respondents either strongly agree or agree with the statement (37% + 51.51%). Only a small proportion of respondents (1.93% + 1.1% = 3.03%) did not recommend online learning and facilitation.

As shown in Table 5, all the observed mean scores are above the threshold limit of 3.0, indicating that, on average, the respondents leaned towards agreement with the statements. The results overwhelmingly show that the majority of students would recommend online learning and facilitation to others. The combined 88.51% of strongly agree and agree responses reflect a high level of satisfaction and positive endorsement of online learning and facilitation.

Overall, the assessment of the online facilitation for the semester indicates that the majority of students were satisfied with the facilitation across various aspects of the course(s). The highest satisfaction levels were observed in the areas of encouragement of active participation and provision of a positive and inclusive learning environment, with over 87% of students expressing satisfaction in each category. The facilitator's responsiveness, as well as the provision of helpful resources and materials, were also positively received, with over 84% of students expressing satisfaction.

However, there are areas with room for improvement. While the majority of students were still satisfied with the interaction with instructors and feedback on assignments, there were higher percentages of neutral and dissatisfied responses compared to other categories.

Approximately 79% of students expressed satisfaction with the online facilitation for the semester. While this is a positive result, it is important to take into account the feedback provided by the students in the areas where improvement is needed and to address any concerns or suggestions to further enhance the online learning experience in future semesters.

1.5 Investigating the Use of Recorded Facilitation Sessions

To study if the recorded sessions were being used and accessed, the following question was asked to those who attended and those who did not.

Q: Do you usually access and view the recordings of past facilitation sessions?

To analyse the responses, we can look at the percentages of students who usually access and view the recordings of past facilitation sessions for both the group of students who participated in facilitation sessions and the group of students who did not participate in online facilitation sessions, The results of the analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Responses for the Recorded Facilitation Sessions

	YES	NO	Invalid
Response from students who participate in facilitation sessions	1223 (84.11%)	224 (15.41%)	7 (0.48%)
Responses from students who did not participate in online facilitation sessions	574 (64.06%)	317 (35.38%)	5 (0.56%)

Table 6 reveals that among students who participated in facilitation sessions, approximately 84.51% usually access and view the recordings of past sessions, while around 15.49% do not. On the other hand, among students who did not participate in facilitation sessions, about 64.39% usually access and view the recordings, while approximately 35.61% do not. The findings show that the majority of students who participate in facilitation sessions tend to view the recorded sessions. This could indicate that they find value in revisiting the content or reviewing materials covered during the live sessions. It is interesting to note that a significant proportion (approximately 64.39%) of students who did not participate in the facilitation sessions still accessed and viewed the recordings. This suggests that recorded sessions may serve as an alternative learning resource for some students who couldn't attend the live sessions or for those who prefer self-paced learning.

Implications for future facilitation sessions:

- Given that a large percentage of students, even those who did not attend live sessions, access the recordings, facilitators may want to ensure the quality and comprehensiveness of the recordings to enhance the learning experience for all students.

- It could be beneficial to promote the availability of recorded sessions to students who might have missed a live session due to various reasons, encouraging them to make use of the recorded materials to catch up on the content.
- Facilitators can consider incorporating interactive elements in the recorded sessions to keep students engaged, even in the absence of real-time interactions during live sessions.

The feedback received from open-ended questions is summarised in the next section.

1.6 Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

Two open-ended questions were asked to better understand the challenges and recommendations from the participants.

What are the challenges and drawbacks you have faced regarding online learning and facilitation? (Provide more insights)"

Based on the responses provided, a thematic analysis of the challenges faced with online facilitation is presented below:

1. Lack of professionalism and commitment from facilitators:
 - Facilitators failed to demonstrate professionalism during sessions.
 - Some facilitators do not show up at all or start coursework close to exams.
 - Facilitators dictate their own materials without engaging students.
2. Poor attendance and awareness:
 - Students have poor attendance for coursework.
 - Inadequate awareness and communication regarding classes and schedules.
 - Lack of notification about facilitation sessions.
3. Technical issues and connectivity:
 - Network interruptions and connectivity problems.
 - Online facilitation time clashes with personal commitments.

- Inability to access NOUN email or online resources.
4. Ineffective course materials and resources:
 - Unsteady academic calendar with frequent postponements.
 - Insufficient course materials or unreadable content (e.g., graphs, tables, graphics).
 - Outdated or obsolete course materials.
 5. Time management and scheduling conflicts:
 - Timing not being student-friendly, conflicting with work or personal commitments.
 - Limited time is given to attempt assignments and short assignment submission windows.
 - Unavailability of recorded facilitations or a known timetable in advance.
 6. Access and technical constraints:
 - Accessibility challenges, including limited access to modern technology or personal computers.
 - Lack of reliable internet access and poor power supply.
 - Difficulty in navigating online platforms and accessing recordings.
 7. Lack of interaction and engagement:
 - Reduced interaction and collaboration opportunities in online settings.
 - Absence of online facilitation or pre-recorded videos for most courses.
 - Lack of personal connection, support, and guidance from instructors.
 8. Assessment and grading issues:
 - Errors in TMA questions and options, lead to incorrect scores.
 - Duplicate correct answers or incomplete questions in TMAs and exams.
 - Lack of clarity on online submission deadlines for assessments.
 9. Motivational and engagement challenges:
 - Lack of motivation and enthusiasm in online facilitation.

- Boredom from facilitators merely reading from slides or materials.
 - Challenges in balancing learning with other daily activities.
10. Financial constraints and data expenses:
- Limited financial resources to afford data subscriptions.
 - The cost of data and internet connectivity becoming a barrier.
 - Expenses associated with online learning and subscriptions.
11. Other miscellaneous challenges:
- Spelling errors or readability issues in course materials.
 - Limited practical components in certain courses.
 - Insufficient support services and delayed responses to student queries.

The thematic analysis reveals several challenges in online facilitation, including lack of professionalism and commitment from facilitators, poor attendance and awareness among students, technical issues and connectivity problems, ineffective course materials, time management and scheduling conflicts, access and technical constraints, lack of interaction and engagement, assessment and grading issues, motivational and engagement challenges, financial constraints and data expenses, and various miscellaneous challenges. Addressing these challenges is crucial to improving the overall quality and accessibility of online facilitation and creating a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all students.

Although some of the issues raised are already being addressed. The foregoing re-iterates the areas for departments, faculty and staff of the University to address more expeditiously.

O: What strategies can be employed by educators and institutions to improve the quality of online learning and better support the needs of distance learners?

The responses provided valuable insights on various aspects of engaging students in online facilitation. Key themes that emerged

include timing and scheduling, recorded facilitations, communication and notifications, interactive and engaging sessions, accessibility of materials, technical considerations, and flexibility and personalisation.

1. **Timing and Scheduling:** Participants suggested scheduling online facilitations at convenient times, such as evenings or weekends, to accommodate working students. They emphasised the importance of fixed schedules and timely notifications to help students plan their study time effectively.
2. **Recorded Facilitations:** There was a consensus among participants on the importance of recorded facilitation sessions. They highlighted the need for making these recordings readily available on the e-learning platform, allowing students to review the content at their own pace and ensuring access for those who cannot attend live sessions.
3. **Communication and Notifications:** Effective communication was deemed essential, with participants suggesting the use of email, SMS, or WhatsApp groups to provide timely notifications and updates about facilitations. Sending reminders and invitations before sessions was also recommended to maximise student participation.
4. **Interactive and Engaging Sessions:** Participants stressed the importance of incorporating interactive and engaging elements in online facilitation. Suggestions included group work, discussions, visual aids, and instructional videos to enhance the learning experience and promote active student participation.
5. **Accessibility of Materials:** The accessibility of course materials was a key concern. Participants recommended providing easily accessible digital and hard copy materials. They emphasised the need for comprehensive study materials, area-specific concentrations, and the revision of outdated content.
6. **Technical Considerations:** Stable internet connectivity and reliable network infrastructure were highlighted as crucial for successful online facilitation. Participants suggested providing technical support to address connectivity issues and ensure a smooth learning experience.
7. **Flexibility and Personalisation:** Flexibility in learning options was encouraged, allowing students to learn at their own pace.

Participants stressed the importance of mentorship, guidance, and personalised attention, particularly for new students, to facilitate a smooth transition into the online learning environment.

8. Examination and Assessment Improvements: Participants suggested improvements in exam scheduling, avoiding clustering of exams, and allowing course facilitators to set exams. They also recommended addressing issues with TMA questions, such as ensuring correct answers are provided and preventing errors in question formulation.

In summary, the students' responses highlighted key strategies to improve online facilitation, including convenient scheduling, recorded facilitations, effective communication, interactive sessions, accessible materials, stable technical support, flexibility, personalised attention, and improvements in examination and assessment procedures. Implementing these suggestions can enhance the overall online learning experience, fostering greater student engagement and satisfaction (Ray, Bala & Dwivedi, 2020; Lasekan, Pachava, Godoy Pena, Golla & Raje, 2024).

Conclusion

This study sought to shed light on the multifaceted landscape of online facilitation from the students' perspective. By understanding the challenges and successes of virtual learning, it may be possible to pave the way for informed decisions and continuous improvements in NOUN's educational delivery practices. The feedback garnered from students' experiences will serve as a valuable resource to enhance the quality and efficacy of online facilitation.

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