

The Efficacy of Online Studies: Addressing the Student Dilemma

Ashok Chanda

July 2021

Online Learning has become extremely *popular* recently owing to the current pandemic situation as well as a *buzz word* among academics, educationist, students and others who are associated with education in one or other forms. Nonetheless, online education is not a new phenomenon. In 1960, at the University of Illinois USA, online learning was first imparted using a network of computers interlinked.¹ The Internet was not available at that time. The University of Phoenix USA, was the pioneer of offering bachelor and master qualifications online and many, thereafter, followed the suit.

With technological advancement and high-speed internet, education has come right up to the doorstep – so to speak. Online learning has grown in leaps and bounds in the last decade and during and likely post pandemic it has/will spread like a wildfire. Almost all universities and institutions around the world have adapted online learning as a method of delivery of their courses.² With students and teachers forced to remain away from classrooms, online learning has been the ‘only way’ to continue learning and teaching.

While the swift changes in mode of delivery transpired from classroom to online by all universities and institutions in order to running throughout the pandemic, students have been left with no choice but to adapt to online learning whether they like it or not. According to Harvard Professor Daniel Schacter in a published proceeding of the National Academy of Sciences - ‘online learning has exploded in popularity in the past few years, there remains shockingly little hard scientific data about how students learn in the virtual classroom.’³

Efficacy of Online learning

In fact, online learning is no more an option, but rather a compulsion. Among student communities, not all students in first instance like or want to remain online for all their studies. Typically, younger generation students miss their social environment, in-person interaction, in-class time, teacher-student engagements, and the feeling of being on a university campus.

With the race on of becoming successful online providers, by almost all universities and institutions across the world, a close look at the efficacy of online learning from the student point of view is worth exploring. Ultimately, the student dilemma must be addressed. Further, it is appropriate to analyse if students who struggle will likely struggle further with the online mode.⁴

In 2004, well before the pandemic struck, a study where 76 graduates were surveyed to learn about student perception of useful and challenging characteristics of online learning, it was found that students were positive about course design, learner motivation, time management

¹ <https://adamasuniversity.ac.in/a-brief-history-of-online-education/>

² Carey, K. (2020). Is everybody ready for the big migration to online college? Actually, no. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com>

³ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/04/online-learning-its-different/>

⁴ <https://www.edweek.org/technology/opinion-how-effective-is-online-learning-what-the-research-does-and-doesnt-tell-us/2020/03>

and 'comfortableness' associated with online learning.⁵ The same study also indicated that technical problems, a perceived lack of community and time constraints are some of the challenges associated with online learning. A large-scale literature study of 50 articles, just prior to the pandemic in 2019, examined each article and observed that 30 of them met the efficacy of online learning with well-planned, well designed courses and programs for higher education institutes.⁶ The most recent post pandemic study on real experience of students embarking on full online learning mode, revealed that there is a moderate to high level of acceptance of online learning among university students.⁷ The latest study explored several key factors in the online learning relating to learning motivation, learning readiness and student self-efficacy in participating in 'live' online learning during the coronavirus outbreak.⁸

Addressing the student dilemma

The range of research before, during and after the pandemic provides a greater insight into why online learning is more effective from the student point of view. Some of the vital concluding reasons that emerge include -

Online learning means reduced stress. It does not demand waking up early or rushing through traffic to get to class on time. The programs are designed to be flexible which allows students to learn at their own pace. Students can rush past topics if they are comfortable and slow down with certain topics that require more attention. This flexibility reduces stress which permits students to focus on topics without having to worry about falling behind. As a result, students can build greater understanding of subjects.

Online learning provides a greater control of the study while it progresses. It provides a balance between work, family, and educational responsibilities. Online learning provides control when one listens to lectures, takes exams, and reviews course materials. It provides flexibility to study at any time and listen to lectures while commuting, for example. It also provides the opportunity to take a step back and review lectures from earlier in the course when students want to reinforce ideas and concepts.

Online learning means less time investment. Many students drop out from face-to-face courses due to time constraints. In addition, attending sessions by getting back and forth to classes, attendance on a particular time can be stressful. A Brandon Hall report on eLearning found that online learning typically requires 40-60% less time than learning in a formal classroom setting.⁹ Online learning allows students to allocate the time they wish depending on the way it best works for them.

Frequent assessments can reduce distractions. One of the great things about online learning is that assessments become more of an ongoing activity. This helps students immensely as regular short tests can encourage students to improve their engagement. Research from

⁵ Liyang Song, Enrise S, Singleton, Jannette R, Hill, Myung Hwa Koh (2004) Improving Online Learning: Student perceptions of useful and Challenging characteristics, *The Internet and Higher Education*, 7(1): 59-70

⁶ Mayleen Dorcas B Castro and Gilbert M Tumibay (2021) A literature Review: Efficacy of online learning courses for higher education institution using meta-analysis, *Education and Information technologies*, 26, 1367-1385.

⁷ Sim, Sandra Phek-Lin; Sim, Hannah Phek-Khiok; Quah, Cheng-Sim (2020) Online Learning: A Post COVID-19 Alternative Pedagogy for University Students, *Asian Journal of University Education*, 16(4), 137-151.

⁸ Yuk MingTang, Pen Chung Chen, Kris M.Y.Law, C.H.Wu, cYui-yipLau, Jieqi Guan, Dan He, G.T.S.Ho (2021) Comparative analysis of Student's live online learning readiness during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the higher education sector, *Computers & Education*, 168, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.10421>

⁹ <https://www.brandonhall.com/blogs/tag/e-learning/>

Harvard showed that using these short, regular tests halved student distraction and improved student overall retention of the content.¹⁰ Moreover, with frequent assessments, lecturers are able to maintain close monitoring of the student progression.

Online learning offers a level playing field. In a perfect world, everyone would get the same level of lecturer attention. In the real world, there are always a handful of students who raise their hands and draw the attention of lecturer. With shy and/or reserved students, this does not happen as they refrain from asking questions in classrooms. Nevertheless, online learning levels the field and gives every student an opportunity to ask their questions. This makes online learning a truly equal environment where students do not have to worry about being the first to raise their hands in order to get the answers they need to master the materials.

Students learn more than they do in traditional courses. IBM have found that participants learn five times more material in online learning courses using digital contents than in traditional face to face courses.¹¹ Since online courses give students full control over their own learning, students are able to work at their own speed. Generally, students work faster than they would do otherwise and take in more information. They are able to move faster through areas of the course they feel comfortable with, but slower through those that they need a little more time on.

Online learning increases retention rates. Many universities struggle to retain students throughout the full length of a course. The Research Institute of America has indicated that this is not the case with online learning.¹² Rather, online courses have increased student retention rates from anything ranging 25% to 60%. Students being able to engage in online digital content with the associated flexibility to juggle their other commitments, has contributed to this growth in retention rates.

Online learning has become mainstream. Employers no longer differentiate between the value of an online degree verses that of a traditional bricks-and-mortar institution. For employers, the most important thing is the evident ability and skill a candidate brings to the job at hand. Furthermore, many organisations have relocated to remote locations. Depending on the profession, one may find employment with an organisation that could be halfway around the world. In such cases, demonstrated ability to perform effectively in an online environment is an additional asset brought to the table by candidates.

Online learning is more environmentally sustainable. Online learning is an effective option for students, but it is also the greener option. The Open University in Britain has uncovered that online courses equate to an average of 90% less energy and 85% fewer Co2 emissions per student than traditional in person courses.¹³ This certainly makes online learning a more environmentally friendly contribution with regard to the global footprint of climate change. Promoting and engaging in online learning can help both individuals and institutions to contribute effectively to sustainability.

¹⁰ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/04/online-learning-its-different/>

¹¹ <https://www.ibm.com/blogs/think/2020/03/pandemic-impacts-millions-of-students-how-digital-learning-can-help/>

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paycom/2017/02/14/learning-management-systems-101-rethinking-your-approach-to-employee-training/?sh=d63db37755bc>

¹³ https://www3.open.ac.uk/events/3/2005331_47403_o1.pdf

Online learning – here to stay

An estimated 290 million students have been impacted globally as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic which, in turn, has created an unprecedented impact with regard to the speed of disruption in education. On a global scale, in almost all countries, schools and universities have chosen to leave behind face-to-face teaching and transformed in favour of online learning.

The closing of classroom doors came with a shock at a time when students were preparing for their upcoming tests. It has provided an opportunity to expand access to online learning with technology and digitised content for both lecturers and students.

With rapidly changing technology and the speed at which businesses must operate to be competitive in a global digital economy, it is clear that online learning for students is essential to remain competitive in the workplace. It is accepted that online learning is not the only way to access learning, but that it does improve access and reduces the cost of continued learning to a wider population of students.



Associate Professor Ashok Chanda is Provost – UBSS Online Campus, Group Colleges Australia