Understanding the Experienced Opportunities and Threats of Online Learning in a Professional Development Programme

Cosmas Maphosa, Talent Rugube, Khetsiwe E. Mthethwa-Kunene, and Patience Dlamini

ABSTRACT

Learning online as a new experience for students who are accustomed to the traditional face-to-face contact learning may be associated with numerous opportunities and threats. The qualitative case study sought to establish, from students; experiences, the opportunities, and threats of online learning. The study was informed by the Community of Inquiry framework and drew from the experiences of the participants of a 4-week long intensive training programme in a rural-based university in Eswatini. A purposive sample of eleven participants participated in the study by completing a programme evaluation form and participating in an online focus group discussion session. The study utilised the thematic content analysis method to analyse the collected qualitative data. The study found that there were several opportunities realised in online learning as well as some challenges which posed threats. The flexibility and convenience offered by studying online and transcending the limitations of time, space, and place were noted together with the utilisation of engaging learning activities, learning material, and content presented in multimedia as well as reliable online technical support and meaningful online academic support. Conversely, the issue of high workload, connectivity issues well as challenges in group activities were reported as threats. The study recommends the leveraging of all opportunities in enhancing online learning and being attended to threats in the planning and implementation of online learning.

Keywords: Advantages, Challenges, Online learning, Virtual learning space.

I. INTRODUCTION

Online learning is important for providing flexibility in learning. Learning online provides learners with great flexibility as it allows the learners to adapt learning to their own needs (Müller & Mildenberger, 2021). Learners who are involved in other activities of life may still find time to study during their free time. As further noted by Kim, Hong, and Song (2019) online learning provides flexible learning opportunities as the learners enjoy the flexibility of time, place, and pace in learning. The flexibility in terms of time is against the view that learning online is not restricted to fixed timetables as it may happen asynchronously. The learners may access pre-recorded learning materials and engage in learning activities on their own time hence there is no possibility of missing out on learning as often associated with the scheduled contact classes.

Through online learning, the learners do not need to travel to campus or classrooms to attend lessons. The flexibility is in attending lessons from the comfort of one's home or office. The ability to study online allows students to cut on costs of travelling to attend classes as they can make use of the available technologies and internet connectivity to access synchronous or asynchronous learning activities and participate fully in the learning process (Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020). There is no longer any need for one to be physically present in the classroom as learning can take place virtually. To this end, online learning becomes very flexible to learners as it is not restricted to a particular place.

Online learning also allows flexibility in teacher contact and this entails how the learners find it easy to communicate with course instructors in a multiplicity of ways (Kokoç, 2019). As noted by Wardlow (2014) online learning provided opportunities for the learners to communicate with the course instructors at any time and from anywhere through various technologies such as email, texts, websites, electronic portfolios, online surveys, and other video chat applications. It, therefore, means that whenever the online learners need to contact the course instructor, there is always a possibility of relaying messages and receiving feedback and some communication may be real-time, which is satisfying to learners and course instructors.
Through online learning, the learners study at their own pace. Online learners view it as an advantage that they do not have to rely on rigid and timetabled learning schedules and their learning is self-paced and convenient to them (De Paepe et al., 2018). The fact that online learners are responsible for their learning allows them greater responsibility and flexibility in learning as they become self-directed learners. The flexibility of self-directed learning online allies the learners to decide when and how they can access learning materials as well as engage with learning activities as they have full control of their learning schedules (LaTour & Noel, 2021). In the traditional face-to-face contact teaching and learning environments, the learners are not in control of the learning schedule. Online learning becomes ideal for mature adults with other commitments as they have to find a convenient time to study.

Online teaching and learning utilise course material in different multimedia formats, which enhances the learning experiences of online learners. The utilisation of the different features of a Learning Management System allows online course instructors to create interactive course content which is highly engaging and allows learners to be fully immersed in the learning process (Prasetya et al., 2020). As noted by Gedera and Zalipour (2018) an interactive video is not an ordinary video but one with a pedagogical design to promote active learning as it makes use of the user input in performing functions.

Course content that is presented in different multimedia formats appeals to the diversity of online learners (Mayer, 2019). Learners have different learning styles as well as ways of comprehending course content hence the need for flexibility in online learning by presenting content differently. Multimedia formats of course include content that may combine text, image, audio, video, animation, and simulation and in a way, alternative ways of providing content are considered in an attempt to reach out to the great diversity of online learners (Mayer, 2019). The visual and the auditory learners will all be accommodated through the different ways in which course content is presented.

Online learning makes use of engaging learning activities such as interactive videos, gamification, simulation, and virtual reality. As noted by Wang, et al. (2014) the utilisation of simulation learners can experience real-life situations. Opportunities to engage in simulation allow the online learners to experience real-life situations online and this enhances the learning experiences (Wang et al., 2014). Gamification, as noted by Hanghøj (2013), is defined as the use of game elements in non-entertainment contexts to promote learning. The combining of gaming and learning makes learning engaging and exciting thereby improving the attainment of the set learning outcomes (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019).

Online learning also affords the learners opportunities for virtual interaction. Interaction is generally referred to as the process of constructing a meaningful exchange of information between and among people (Baber, 2021). Interaction is a very important factor in the learners’ online learning experiences as it contributes positively to the attainment of learning outcomes (Alquarashi, 2019). Furthermore, interaction is viewed as vital in the learners’ processes of building knowledge through working collaboratively with others and in the process empowers the learners as co-constructors of knowledge (Holland, 2019). Therefore, as the learners interact with content, fellow learners, and course instructors in an online course, they enhance their online learning experiences and increase their chances for academic success.

The ability to work collaboratively with others is an important soft skill required in the 21st century. In the business world managers value employees who are team players and can work collaboratively with others for the attainment of the organisational goals (England, et al., 2019). The skill of working collaboratively which is developed in online learning is a significant life-long skill that assists learners in the different facets of their socio-economic and political lives.

Technical support is also very important in online learning. Interaction with technology is a very important determinant of learners’ success in online learning (Van den Berg, 2020). There should be training and support for the learners so that they would be able to utilise the technologies for learning. The online learning environment, through the use of Learning Management Systems, exposes learners to new tools for communication and the learners should learn and be able to use such tools (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014). The learners should be trained and supported in the utilisation of the different features of the Learning Management Systems (Hsiao & Huang, 2019). Ideally, before the commencement of an online course, the learners should be taken through an introductory course on how to navigate the online learning environment (Walters-Archie, 2018) that consisted of four phases: an introduction to the online learning environment with a focus on navigation skills.

Academic online support is also necessary to assist the online learners to navigate the course. In the community of inquiry framework, Garrison et al., (2001) state the importance of teaching presence in the virtual learning space. In the teaching presence, the course instructor supports discourse by being available online to support the learners in all aspects of their learning. The course instructors should be available online to offer online learners with academic support and the online learning experiences of the learners are enhanced by the support offered online (Van Wyk, 2021). Furthermore, online learners should be provided with opportunities to engage with the course materials, course activities, and fellow learners as active learners through deliberate guidance and support from the course instructors (Buelow et al., 2018).

II. THREATS TO ONLINE LEARNING

In studying in the virtual spaces there is a challenge of the digital divide, which is a threat to meaningful online teaching and learning. The unequal access to digital technologies among people in the developing world is caused by differences in the economic and social standing of people (Mathrani et al., 2021). In the South African context, learner participation in online learning is a challenge for most learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds as they have challenges in access to the required technologies for online learning (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016). Therefore, in instances where some learners lack access to the appropriate
The study followed a qualitative research approach which important factor was support from peers reflecting cooperation. Peer support should be encompassed within practice through time allocation and encouragement of collaboration, effectively challenging competitive educational traditions (Kalliola et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020). Students with practical problems in the reconciliation of studies, family, and work should be supported in the first year of their studies (Rahaman & Jannat, 2015).

Kalliola et al. (2017) underscored the importance of collaboration between employers and universities to more fully consider adult learners’ support needs and wider lives. According to Fenech and Raykov (2018), the support could come in different forms including paid study leave or sabbaticals; financial incentives by employers or the government apart from support for students with financial needs. The support of incentives from the employer is particularly valuable in the case of working students undertaking studies that are related to their job as their involvement in higher education contributes to increasing educational attainment, and productivity and improves the quality of work (Fenech & Raykov, 2018).

The utilisation of group activities is important in inculcating values of teamwork and collaboration yet there are some challenges associated with the implementation of group work online which become a threat to online learning. Learners may have different levels of commitment and responsibility toward an online group task (Chang & Kang, 2016). Such differences are exacerbated by a lack of physical communication and contact and may negatively affect progress in a task as well as the overall attainment of group goals. There are some group members who may not be willing to participate meaningfully in online group activities and become free riders (Roberts & McInerney, 2007).

A. Research Objectives
The study sought to answer the following research objectives;

i) To ascertain the course participants’ views about the opportunities associated with online learning

ii) To establish from course participants’ perspectives the experienced threats of the online learning initiative.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
In this section, the methodological processes and procedures are discussed.

A. Research Paradigm
The study is located in the interpretivist research paradigm whose ontological position holds that people view reality in different ways and that there are multiple realities (Creswell, 2014). On the epistemological assumptions, interpretivism holds the view that there are no absolute truths and that there are multiple and subjective truths constructed through close interaction with the research participants (Cohen et al., 2018). In the context study, the researcher believed in the multiple representations of truths about opportunities and threats in online learning as expressed by the participants through their experiences in an online course.

B. Research Approach
The study followed a qualitative research approach which
was deemed appropriate in gathering the participants’ insights, views, and opinions by the utilization of less structured methods to explain phenomena fully (Dennis, 2016). The study sought to establish the participants’ insights and not mere statistical analysis (Patton, 2015). The researchers held the assumption that human behaviour and experiences were best understood in a social context, hence the desire to capture the views of the course participants at the conclusions of the online course.

C. Research Design

A case study design was utilised in the present study. A case study involves a thorough, detailed, and systematic exploration of an individual, group, or community by a researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of an issue under study (Heale & Twycross, 2018). A case study design also details insights of the participants on a particular issue and in a specific context (Sammut-Bonnici & McGee, 2017). The current study focused on the views of the participants of an online course, intending to detail their experiences regarding opportunities and threats in online learning.

D. Selection of the Research Participants

The researchers utilised the purposive sampling technique to select the participants for the study. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling technique that exploits unambiguous conditions or purpose to choose a particular sample, with the aim being to collect in-depth information from the participants with knowledge about the issue under investigation (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2017). All the eleven participants of an online education course were selected for the current study.

E. Data Generation Instrument

The data in the current study were collected using an open-ended questionnaire, which formed part of the online course evaluation component. As noted by Züll (2016) an open-ended questionnaire allows the respondents to reflect and think about any issue before providing their views without any influence from the researcher. An online focus group discussion was also utilised to collect data for the study. The researchers may utilise the Zoom video conferencing facility to allow participants to exchange stories and share experiences about an issue under investigation and through the interaction of the participants, richer insights are elicited (Archibald et al., 2019).

F. Data Trustworthiness

Several measures were employed as quality assurance measures for the qualitative data collected. Expert opinion was sought to validate the data collection instruments. The participants were also involved in member checking of the collected data and this assisted in correcting some views which had not been captured well.

G. Data Analysis

The thematic content analysis was utilised to analyse the qualitative data collected using the open-ended questionnaire and the online focus group discussions. The researchers utilised thematic content analysis to provide meaning to the participants’ narratives and themes and sub-themes were drawn to systematically analyse the participants’ views on threats and opportunities in online learning. The themes and sub-themes were supported by verbatim quotations from the participants.

H. Ethical Issues

The researchers attended to several ethical concerns such as informed consent as well as anonymity and confidentiality. Data were collected from the participants anonymously and in the strictest confidence. The identities of the participants were not revealed in the reporting of findings.

IV. RESULTS PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

In describing the participants, the researchers focused on three considerations; gender, position, and highest qualification as shown in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Highest Qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University Lecturer</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>College Lecturer</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High school teacher</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>College Lecturer</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High school teacher</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant F</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>College lecturer</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant G</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>College lecturer</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant H</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High school teacher</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant I</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>University Lecturer</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant J</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>University Lecturer</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A total of eleven participants participated in the study and these included both males and females, who had participated in an online professional development course. All the participants were teaching in high schools, colleges, or the university. The participants were highly qualified in terms of their professional qualifications, with the least qualified holding a Bachelor’s degree and the most qualified being in possession of a Ph.D.

A. Results on Participants’ Experienced Opportunities and Threats in Online Learning in an Online Education Course

In line with the thematic content analysis strategy utilised in analysing data. The results are presented thematically with the themes and sub-themes concerning course participants’ views on opportunities and threats in online learning. The results are reported by referring to the codes shown in Table one and result reporting was linked to the instrument utilised in the collection of data, with Q for questionnaire and FGD for Focus Group Discussion. Table II captures the themes and the issues raised.

B. Experienced Opportunities of Online Learning

The participants of the online course indicated that their experiences and opportunities in the course included flexibility, convenience, and engaging activities.

C. Learning Flexibility and Convenience

The participants also attested to experiences with flexibility and convenience. There was an indication that the online learning programme enabled the participants to study without any restriction of time and place and the following excerpts confirm that:
TABLE II: THEMES AND ISSUES RAISED CONCERNING COURSE PARTICIPANTS’ VIEWS ON OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS IN ONLINE LEARNING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal research objective</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Issues raised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To reveal the opportunities of an online learning initiative.</td>
<td>Flexibility and convenience</td>
<td>-learning not restricted to time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-learning not restricted to place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-always catching up on tasks during free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging activities</td>
<td>-highly interactive activities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Material and activities in multimodal formats</td>
<td>-hands-on and practical activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for collaboration</td>
<td>-opportunities to work with others online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliable technical support</td>
<td>-learning from each other feeling connected to other learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meaningful academic support</td>
<td>-training and support on technology use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workload issues</td>
<td>-technical assistance when required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges with online group activities</td>
<td>-a lot of content and activities in a short space of time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connectivity issues</td>
<td>-delays in submission due to group members’ work rate differences</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-challenges of different personalities in a group</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-failure to access the Moodle LMS at times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-network problems encountered at times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-high data cost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To establish the threats of the online learning initiative.

The participants felt the activities were high flexibility and convenience with some of the hand-on activities, hands-on and practical activities. They experienced technical challenges with some of the hand-on activities as revealed by the following excerpts from some of the participants:

**I was able to schedule my two hours of study every day after work and I found this to be good for me because I could do my normal work duties and still find time to study.** (FGD Participant B)

**The online course allowed me to study early in the morning and at home before leaving for work. I had designed my own early morning timetable and it worked well for me.** (Q Participant D)

**I was able to do some of my work in my office during lunchtime as I would just lock myself in and utilise a full hour to catch up on my work.** (FGD Participant J)

The above excerpts from the participants indicate that the participants confirmed the flexibility and convenience of online learning as they experienced in the online course that they undertook. The finding that online learning enabled the learners to enjoy the flexibility of learning without the restriction of time and space confirms the possibility of learners’ ability to study and work. This finding resonates well with some scholars who advocate for suitable strategies in workplaces that accommodate studies among employees (Smith et al., 2020; Fenech & Raykov, 2018; Kalliola et al., 2017). Furthermore, Kim et al. (2019) note the flexible learning schedules associated with online learning where learners can access course content and participate in asynchronous learning activities at any time and from anywhere.

D. Utilisation of Engaging Activities

The participants of the online course indicated that their experiences and opportunities in the course included flexibility, convenience, and engaging activities.

E. Experienced Opportunities of Online Learning

The participants felt the activities were highly interactive activities, hands-on and practical activities. They experienced technical challenges with some of the hand-on activities as revealed by the following excerpts from some of the participants:

**The topic of creating digital learning materials was quite involving as I worked practically on Embedding and attaching my h5p interactive video to Moodle** (FGD Participant J)

**The online collaborative task of working on a Google Docs document with a colleague allowed me to actually involved in jointly developing a document online** (FGD Participant J)

I was practically involved in preparing PowerPoint slides for an online lesson and recording a video with voice-over narration to embed onto the slides (Q Participant H)

The excerpts above from the participants showed that the participants indicated that it was exciting to be involved in engaging activities online as it enhanced their learning experiences. This finding is consistent with the views by Koivisto and Hamari (2019) that the use of practical activities in different formats such as simulation and gamification makes learning engaging and exciting in online learning and is also important in enhancing chances for the attainment of learning outcomes. Similarly, Collier (2014) notes the importance of providing conditions in which learners engage in learning, without necessarily providing them with information. Learners should be creators of knowledge, which they can share with others.

F. Utilisation of Course Materials and Learning Activities in Multimodal Formats

The participants of the online course also indicated the advantage enjoyed through the use of materials and learning activities in different multimodal formats. The verbatim quotations from some of the participants are indicative of this view;

**Some of the course materials were in print, video and audio formats and this was good for me as I could learn differently.** (FGD Participant J)

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The learning activities allow the learners to be involved in learning activities in multiple ways including even creating actual products. (FGD Participant F)

Interactive videos that were used made it possible for me to work on my own and obtain immediate feedback and this made it possible for me to progress with my studies very well. (Q Participant A)

I enjoyed accessing course content in audio format as I would be able to play the audio recordings even in my car and learn a lot from the audio files. (FGD Participant C)

The verbatim quotations from the participants confirmed the opportunities to learn through the use of course materials and learning activities in multimodal formats. This finding is supported by related views in the literature indicating the utility of multimodal content and activities in enhancing online learning experiences. As noted by Mayer (2019) when course content is presented in different multimedia formats it would appeal to online learners with different learning styles and allows learners to learn in styles that best suit them. Course content should be presented in pedagogically sound ways that ensure that learners are involved in highly interactive and active learning approaches (Gedera & Zalipour, 2018).

G. Opportunities for Collaborative Learning

The participants also indicated that learning online afforded them with opportunities to work with other learners in virtual learning spaces, they learned from each other and felt connected in the learning process. The following verbatim quotations from the participants support the theme on collaboration.

There were a number of activities that made it possible for me to work together with others online and I enjoyed working with others despite not being physically together. (FGD Participant B)

I learnt a lot from my colleagues as we were working together online on different tasks. We would bring different ideas that we shared. (FGD Participant I)

Learning online is exciting when one feels connected with others. Through various online activities, I always felt connected to the other learners. (Q Participant K)

The issue of collaboration as an important aspect of online learning and viewed as an opportunity is also supported in the literature. It is important for online learning activities to provide learners with opportunities for interaction, which makes it possible for learners to exchange information (Baber, 2021). In interacting and working collaboratively with others, the online learners are empowered in joint knowledge construction and shuttering which are vital aspects of deeper learning (Holland, 2019).

H. Reliable Technical Support

It is a great advantage in online learning when learners enjoy reliable technical and academic support. The participants found the issue of reliable technical and academic support a vital opportunity in online learning as shown in the following excerpts:

We worked with an excellent technical team which was always available to offer technical support whenever required. (FGD Participant H)

As one who is not very competent in technology use, I always found myself requesting assistance and it was provided. (Q Participant A)

In instances where learners are provided with technical support as they learn online, it becomes pleasurable to work online. This finding is consistent with views by Van den Berg (2020) that interaction with technology is the most fundamental form of interaction in online learning as it makes it possible for learners to participate in online learning. The online learning environment, through the use of Learning Management Systems, exposes learners to new tools for communication and the learners should learn and be able to use such tools (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014).

1. Meaningful Academic Support

The study found that the provision of meaningful academic support in online courses was considered an opportunity in online learning. Some of the views from the participants on academic support are captured as follows;

The course instructors were always available to provide guidance in instances where instructions were not very clear. (Q Participant F)

There was much of the teaching presence as our facilitators were always with us, giving us the much-needed support. (FGD Participant E)

The importance of meaningful academic support in online learning as an important finding of the current study is consistent with one of the ‘presences’ in the Community of Inquiry framework by Garrison et al. (2001). The teaching presence is very important as it allows the course instructor to provide academic support to the learners online. In the same vein, Van Wyk (2021) observes that it is imperative for course instructors to be available online to support the learners.

2. Experienced Threats of Online Learning

The participants also indicated that their experienced threats included workload issues, connectivity issues, challenges with online group activities, and appropriateness of devices utilised.

3. Workload Issues

The participants also voiced challenges about workload. They experienced workload overload concerning content and activities. According to them, there was a lot of content and activities in a short space of time. They felt more time was required for the online course and some of the concerns were as follows:

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2022.3.3.366
The modules require a lot of time to go through as they are packed for people who are doing it on a part-time basis. (FGD Participant J)

I found it extremely difficult to balance between work, family, and learning commitments. The course required a lot of time for one to complete all the activities. (FGD Participant G)

It would be more useful if the course is spread over a longer period of time so that some of us with demanding schedules at work and at home would be able to spread the course over some time and complete it. (FGD Participant E)

The challenge of workload issues affecting the learning of adult learners in distance education programmes is confirmed by Fenech and Raykov (2018) who note that the adult learner has several other commitments in personal, work, and family life which have to be considered together with the learning commitments, and it is often difficult to multi-task. Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) state that engagement in distance education programmes, which may be online, is a difficult task for adult learners who have to strike an intricate work-life balance.

L. Connectivity Issues

The participants experienced connectivity issues such as failure to access the Moodle Learning Management System at times, network problems encountered at times, and high data costs. Some of the connectivity concerns were captured as follows:

We were pressed for time, especially in the last activity where the strain was further exacerbated by power outages caused by a storm. Also, some links were not opening causing a delay in continuing to the next activity. (Q Participant A)

To be honest, I incurred very huge data costs for me to be able to go through the whole course. It was expensive for me because I always required data to download material and participate in the learning activities. (FGD Participant D)

I stay in a remote area and internet connectivity is very weak so I had serious challenges in accessing Moodle. I struggled with connectivity throughout the course. (FGD Participant K)

The issues of connectivity challenges raised by the participants are consistent with an assertion by Hadjeris (2021) that online learners require strong, reliable, and fast internet connectivity to fully derive the benefits of online learning through active participation. The same views about connectivity issues are shattered by Basar et al. (2021) who lament the inefficiency of online learning initiatives insofar as they demand much from the learners in terms of cost of equipment and data.

M. Challenges with Online Group Activities

Whilst the use of group work in the virtual learning space is important in promoting interaction and collaboration, it may be considered a threat to online learning because of the challenges of conducting group activities online. Some of the concerns of the participants are shown as:

While online group work was a good idea. It was a challenge as we had different work rates. Some group members were not forthcoming with ideas to assist in completing the work. (FGD Participant F)

We allocated each other work to do but we were held back by other colleagues who were not able to do the work on time. (Q Participant B)

I think it is good to allow students to choose their own group members so that one is able to work together with people that have the same interests and abilities. (FGD Participant H)

The finding around challenges in online group work confirms findings in earlier studies. As noted by Chang and Kang (2016) progress and achievement of group goals may be hampered by the way learners differ in their commitment and how they assume responsibilities for a group task. In this regard, some learners may derail group progress, and learning online through group activities becomes an unpleasant experience as some learners may be frustrated. Similarly, Roberts and McInnerney, (2007) note the problems of free-riders who may not be willing to play their part in a group activity and rely on others, which is a challenge in online learning.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that because of the participants' experiences in an online course, there were several opportunities realised in online learning as well as some challenges which posed threats. The flexibility and convenience offered by studying online and transcending the limitations of time, space, and place were noted together with the utilisation of engaging learning activities, learning material, and content presented in multimedia as well as reliable online technical support and meaningful online academic support. Conversely, the issue of high workload, connectivity issues well as challenges in group activities were reported as threats.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

In the light of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

a) The flexibility and convenience of online learning should be leveraged to enhance the students’ online learning experiences.

b) In online course design, the use of engaging and interactive course materials and learning activities should be emphasised as it allows online learners to be active and self-directed in their learning.

c) The issue of training and support in technology use should be prioritised in online learning.

d) The bandwidth and connectivity issues should be addressed to allow learners flawless access to online learning.
course content and learning activities.

e) It is vital to evaluate online learning courses and ascertain strengths and weaknesses from the learners’ point of view.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that we do not have any conflict of interest.

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