From Isolation to Engagement: Understanding and Addressing Online Learning Challenges among University Students

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From Isolation to Engagement: Understanding and Addressing Online Learning Challenges among University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the challenges faced by undergraduate students in an online learning environment at Raden Fatah State University. Through qualitative interviews with 15 students in the Islamic Psychology program, the research identified four primary obstacles: technical issues, lack of a supportive learning environment, limited interaction, and low motivation. Findings indicated that students frequently struggled with unstable internet connections and limited resources, which disrupted their ability to engage effectively in virtual classrooms. Additionally, students reported difficulties in maintaining motivation and coping with the lack of meaningful interaction in online settings. To address these challenges, the study suggested various strategies, including fostering flexibility, enhancing peer connections, supporting emotional well-being, and incorporating engaging content. This research highlighted the need for educational institutions to adopt adaptive online teaching approaches and provide professional development for educators. By doing so, institutions could enhance the quality of the online learning experience and better support students in virtual academic environments. The study recommended future research using mixed-method approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of online learning dynamics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has radically transformed the global educational landscape since 2019, compelling educational institutions to adapt to online learning models almost overnight (Ayittey et al., 2020; Villela et al., 2021). Health and safety concerns, alongside government-mandated lockdowns, led to the immediate closure of traditional classroom settings worldwide, pushing educators and students to embrace digital platforms to maintain academic continuity (Jena, 2020). This sudden transition, while necessary, presented significant pedagogical and

logistical challenges, as both instructors and students struggled to navigate the new virtual environment. The shift to online learning was especially pronounced in higher education, where institutions faced the challenge of adapting complex curricula to digital formats without prior extensive training or infrastructure (Lei & Medwell, 2021).

China's rapid shift to online education serves as a pertinent example of this global trend. In response to school closures, Chinese educators implemented digital platforms swiftly, showcasing resilience and adaptability in transitioning from face-to-face instruction to a virtual format. However, this transformation underscored critical gaps in preparedness, particularly in digital literacy among both students and faculty (Lei & Medwell, 2021). Similarly, across other countries, higher education institutions experienced various challenges associated with digital learning, such as technical limitations, disparities in students' access to digital resources, and the psychological impact of remote learning on students (Wang, 2020; Xue et al., 2020; Barrot et al., 2021).

Online learning, defined as a mode of distance education facilitated through the internet, allows learners and instructors to engage remotely, thus providing continuity in learning amid global crises (Kaur, 2020). This model of learning, while advantageous for its flexibility and accessibility, also brings inherent challenges. Online learning requires students to become self-directed learners, effectively managing their time, accessing resources independently, and adapting to new modes of interaction (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Mulya & Putro, 2024). Moreover, studies have identified specific barriers to engagement and motivation within virtual classrooms, where students often face feelings of isolation, lack of real-time feedback, and limited social interaction compared to traditional settings (Littlefield, 2018; Vonderwell, 2004). These challenges underscore the need for institutions to provide comprehensive support systems, including technical assistance, structured digital pedagogies, and accessible resources to facilitate effective learning (McBrien et al., 2009).

In Indonesia, institutions such as Raden Fatah Islamic State University in Palembang encountered substantial challenges during this shift to digital learning. The transition highlighted issues such as limited infrastructure, communication barriers, and the variability in students' access to stable internet connections. Preliminary interviews conducted with students at the university reveal that they frequently struggle with unstable network connections and miscommunication with instructors, issues that can significantly impede learning outcomes and lead to academic frustration. Such challenges are consistent with findings from studies by Widayanti (2021) and Hariawati (2021), which highlight logistical and pedagogical barriers as major obstacles in implementing effective online learning. These studies illustrate how the sudden reliance on digital platforms, without adequate technological support or training, can exacerbate existing educational inequities, particularly in under-resourced regions.

Technical issues, such as unreliable internet connections and insufficient technological infrastructure, are among the primary challenges in online learning environments (Crawford et al., 2020). Furthermore, online learning requires effective communication between students, educators, and administrative staff, an area where many institutions fall short due to unfamiliarity with digital platforms or inadequate support. The lack of direct, face-to-face interaction also introduces challenges in establishing rapport and trust, which are critical components of the learning process (Salmon, 2002). Consequently, these communication gaps often lead to misunderstandings and a decrease in students' motivation and engagement, as indicated in the work by Vonderwell (2004) on the dynamics of online learning.

Recent studies have further identified psychological and emotional challenges associated with online learning, including feelings of isolation and reduced motivation among students (Ming et al., 2021). Online education can sometimes foster a sense of detachment due to limited social interaction, which may adversely impact students' mental well-being. Additionally, asynchronous learning environments, where students do not receive immediate feedback, can diminish the perceived support and engagement typically associated with traditional classrooms (Littlefield, 2018). As Baig (2011) noted, effective online learning requires a balanced integration of self-directed learning practices, consistent interaction, and instructor support to ensure meaningful student engagement.

This study seeks to address the identified challenges faced by undergraduate students in online classrooms, focusing specifically on exploring the obstacles they encounter and suggesting strategies for improvement. By examining the various dimensions of online learning, including technical issues, communication barriers, and the psychological impact on students, this research aims to provide actionable insights for enhancing the online learning experience. The findings are anticipated to inform policy recommendations and practical solutions to create more inclusive, accessible, and effective virtual learning environments. Ultimately, this study underscores the need for educational institutions to adapt online pedagogical approaches thoughtfully, ensuring that both technological infrastructure and teaching practices align to support students' holistic well-being and academic success.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to yield in-depth insights into the challenges faced by undergraduate students in online learning environments. A qualitative approach was selected to allow for a more nuanced understanding of students' experiences and perceptions, particularly within the context of Islamic Psychology at Raden Fatah State University (Creswell, 2014). The study involved 15 participants from the university's Islamic Psychology program, chosen through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate to ensure that the selected participants possessed specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

To be included in the study, participants needed to meet two primary criteria. First, they had to be students of the Islamic Psychology program, as the research focused on examining online learning challenges within this discipline. Second, only students with at least one year of experience in online learning were eligible, as this ensured participants had sufficient exposure to online education to provide meaningful reflections on their challenges and experiences.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, a method well-suited for qualitative research aimed at capturing participants' personal experiences in depth (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013). Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore specific issues while also accommodating new insights that may arise during the conversation (Gillham, 2005). Each interview session lasted approximately 5 to 15 minutes and was conducted in an informal yet structured manner, allowing participants to openly share their perspectives on the obstacles they faced in online learning contexts. The interview protocol was designed to probe into various dimensions of online learning challenges, including technological, academic, and social aspects.

The interviews were conducted verbally, recorded with the participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. This approach aligns with the recommendations by Creswell (2012), who emphasizes the importance of real-time data recording in qualitative research to ensure accuracy and depth of information. The interview questions were designed to elicit students' insights into the obstacles and barriers they encounter in virtual learning settings, providing data that could later be analyzed thematically.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data, following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data, making it a widely used method for interpreting qualitative data in educational research (Robson & Cartan, 2016). The analysis followed several phases: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This rigorous coding process helped to identify key themes related to the specific challenges students face in online learning environments.

In addition to the qualitative analysis, descriptive statistics were applied to provide an overview of demographic characteristics, such as participants' age, gender, and level of study, which were relevant in contextualizing the findings (Muazza et al., 2018; Muazza et al., 2019). The use of both thematic analysis and descriptive statistics allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of the data,

addressing both individual experiences and patterns that emerged across participants. This methodological approach aimed to provide a holistic view of students' challenges in online learning, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors impacting their academic experiences.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the research have to be supported by sufficient data. The research results and the discovery must be the answers, or the research hypothesis stated previously in the introduction part.

Challenges Faced by Students in Online Learning

This study investigated the challenges experienced by undergraduate students at Raden Fatah State University within an online learning environment. Through in-depth interviews with 15 students enrolled in the Islamic Psychology program, four key themes emerged, revealing the multifaceted nature of obstacles encountered in virtual classrooms: technical issues, lack of support in the learning environment, reduced interaction, and low motivation among students.The frequency distribution of each challenge category is displayed in Figure 1, illustrating the proportion of students who identified specific obstacles in their online learning experience.

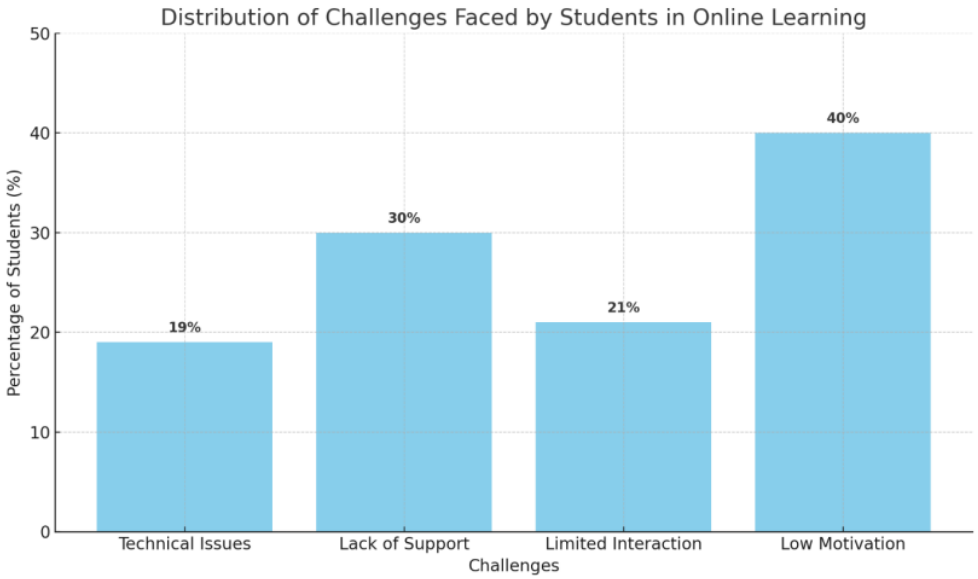

Figure 1: Distribution of challenges in online learning

Based on the data displayed in Figure 1, it is evident that "low motivation" and "lack of a supportive environment" were the most frequently reported challenges, indicating significant barriers to effective online learning. technical issues: 19%; lack of supportive environment: 30%;limited interaction: 21%;low motivation: 40%.Each challenge is detailed below.

Technical Issues with the Use of Technology

One prominent theme that emerged was the students' struggle with technical issues, particularly with internet connectivity and platform stability. Students NL, DN, and NB specifically noted that unreliable internet connections and technical disruptions often hampered their learning experience. As NL explained:

"Technical issues are bound to happen in an online-only environment. This may sound obvious, but technical issues, and internet connection only add to the online environment's frustration and interrupt new distance learning sessions" (NL, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

Similarly, DN expressed frustration over power outages and focus challenges:

"Connection, the electricity goes off, students do not focus on" (DN, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

These responses underscore the critical role of stable technological infrastructure in ensuring an uninterrupted online learning experience, as highlighted in previous research on digital education challenges (Crawford et al., 2020).

Lack of Support in the Learning Environment

Another frequently cited challenge was the perceived lack of a supportive learning environment. Many students felt that remote learning lacked the structural support present in traditional classrooms, leading to distractions and difficulties in time management. NL elaborated on these environmental challenges:

"Distractions are a reality of distance learning… pets running into the home office can be disruptive for everyone involved. As a result, time management becomes more challenging" (NL, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

Similarly, LB expressed frustration over the monotony of virtual classes:

"Sometimes, I was so bored just looking at my monitor and listening to the lectures. I feel like I have to do something to cheer myself up during the class" (LB, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

These responses highlight that the absence of an engaging and supportive environment is a notable barrier, impacting students' ability to stay focused and motivated during online learning sessions (McBrien et al., 2009).

Limited Interaction

The data also revealed that students perceived a lack of meaningful interaction in online classes, which affected their learning experience. Students, particularly those in rural areas with limited internet access, noted that virtual classes lacked the real-time interaction found in face-to-face settings. TR shared:

"The biggest challenge for me is the lack of interaction and motivation, especially due to living in a rural area where connectivity is a problem" (TR, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

AS echoed the need for more interactive sessions:

"Real-time interaction is needed for more effective learning" (AS, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

These responses indicate that the lack of interaction in online environments can foster a sense of isolation, making it difficult for students to remain engaged and motivated (Vonderwell, 2004).

Low Student Motivation

Low motivation emerged as the most frequently mentioned challenge among the participants. Many students reported that online learning felt less effective than traditional face-to-face education, with several participants mentioning that it increased their anxiety and reduced their confidence. TR articulated this issue:

"I feel a lack of interaction and motivation… the efficacy of online learning is less than face-to-face teaching, especially for higher education students. Online learning makes me feel more anxious as I rarely interact with lecturers and classmates directly" (TR, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

NN supported this sentiment by emphasizing the impact of extended screen time and the lack of non-verbal cues:

"Excess exposure to screen time, and we cannot see the overall gestures of the person we're conversing with" (NN, personal communication, May 16, 2022).

This finding aligns with existing literature on student motivation in online settings, highlighting that reduced social interaction can lower engagement and academic confidence (Littlefield, 2018).

Solutions to Overcome Online Learning Challenges

Analyzing the effectiveness of proposed solutions for the challenges faced by students in online learning environments involves assessing how each solution addresses the specific issues identified (e.g., low motivation, technical issues, lack of interaction, and inadequate support). Below, I'll outline each proposed solution and evaluate its potential effectiveness based on best practices and previous research findings.

1. **Incorporating Flexibility**

   Proposed Solution

   Allow students to access recorded lectures and course materials asynchronously. This approach can help students who face technical disruptions or scheduling conflicts.

   Effectiveness Analysis

   Flexibility through asynchronous learning is generally effective for students who have intermittent internet connectivity or other responsibilities (McBrien et al., 2009). By recording sessions, students can review content at their convenience, which reduces stress and allows for better information retention. This approach also benefits students with varied learning speeds, as they can pause or rewatch content.

   Expected Outcome

   Increased access to learning materials and reduced anxiety around technical issues. This solution is highly effective for students facing logistical or technical challenges.

2. **Promoting Emotional Well-being and Self-Motivation**

   Proposed Solution

   Encourage students to develop self-regulated learning strategies and focus on mental well-being to combat the monotony and isolation of online learning.

   Effectiveness Analysis

   Studies indicate that self-regulated learning practices, such as setting personal goals and managing time effectively, positively impact online students' performance and motivation (Zimmerman, 2002). Promoting emotional well-being can be achieved by incorporating brief wellness checks, stress-management resources, and online mental health support into the course structure.

   Expected Outcome

   Improved student engagement and mental health. This solution may not fully overcome low motivation for all students, but it can build resilience and self-motivation, providing moderate to high effectiveness.

3. **Encouraging Peer Interaction**

   Proposed Solution

   Facilitate opportunities for students to interact through discussion forums, breakout rooms in synchronous sessions, and collaborative projects.

   Effectiveness Analysis

   Social interaction is a critical factor in maintaining motivation and fostering a sense of community, especially in online environments where students may feel isolated (Vygotsky, 1978). By encouraging group work and peer discussions, students are more likely to feel connected to their peers, which helps alleviate feelings of loneliness and disengagement. The effectiveness of this approach increases when structured around clear goals and guidance.

   Expected Outcome

   Enhanced peer support and reduced feelings of isolation. This solution is highly effective in addressing the challenge of limited interaction.

4. **Creating Engaging Content**

   Proposed Solution

Integrate multimedia resources, interactive quizzes, and hands-on virtual labs to make learning more dynamic and engaging.

Effectiveness Analysis

Research shows that interactive content improves attention and retention by catering to various learning preferences and breaking the monotony of traditional lectures (Mayer, 2009). Multimedia resources can also provide deeper insights into complex topics, enhancing comprehension and making learning more enjoyable.

Expected Outcome

Increased student engagement and reduced monotony. This solution is particularly effective for maintaining attention, with a moderate to high impact on student motivation.

5. Establishing Clear Communication Channels

Proposed Solution

Set up dedicated channels for regular updates, Q&A, and one-on-one interaction with instructors, including virtual office hours and discussion forums.

Effectiveness Analysis

Effective communication reduces misunderstandings and helps students feel supported, which is essential in online learning where physical cues are absent (Gillham, 2005). Students are more likely to stay on track when they feel they have access to guidance, and regular feedback can enhance their academic confidence.

Expected Outcome

Better clarity, reduced confusion, and a stronger support system for students. This solution has a high effectiveness rate for improving support and interaction.

6. Providing Technical Support and Preparation Guidance

Proposed Solution

Offer preparatory resources and technical assistance to help students manage connectivity, device issues, and necessary software applications.

Effectiveness Analysis

Access to reliable technical support is essential in overcoming technical barriers (Crawford et al., 2020). Providing tutorials, troubleshooting resources, and ensuring that students have the right equipment can significantly reduce frustration associated with technical disruptions.

Expected Outcome

Reduced technical interruptions and improved participation in online activities. This solution is highly effective for minimizing technical issues.

Overall Effectiveness Summary:

High Effectiveness

Incorporating flexibility, encouraging peer interaction, and establishing clear communication channels have consistently proven effective in addressing specific student challenges, particularly in maintaining motivation, reducing isolation, and ensuring technical stability.

Moderate to High Effectiveness

Promoting emotional well-being, self-regulated learning strategies, and engaging content have a moderate to high impact on students' motivation and engagement, but their success depends on consistent application and individual student receptivity.

These solutions, when combined, provide a comprehensive approach to overcoming the key challenges in online learning. Implementing these strategies as part of a structured online learning support system can significantly enhance the student experience and improve academic outcomes. Future studies could measure the effectiveness of each solution in different student demographics to further validate these findings and optimize intervention strategies.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate significant dissatisfaction among college students with online learning, primarily due to reduced engagement and perceived inefficacy in virtual classrooms. These findings are consistent with previous research by Means et al. (2009) and Alawamleh et al. (2020), which suggests that while online learning offers flexibility, it presents unique challenges that impact its effectiveness. According to Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), online education faces substantial obstacles, including limited interaction and technical difficulties, which align with the challenges identified in this study. This section discusses these challenges in detail and examines potential solutions in light of the existing literature.

Technical Issues with Technology

A significant barrier identified in this study involves technical issues, particularly for students residing in remote areas with unstable internet connections. Students reported frequent interruptions in connectivity, impacting their ability to engage in real-time learning. This aligns with findings from Mohalik and Sahoo (2020) and Gama et al. (2020), who also observed that students in remote areas struggle with connectivity issues, with only 25% of students in their study reporting stable internet access. Similarly, studies by Joshi et al. (2020) and Mustakim (2020) highlight that limited internet access, lack of technological skills, and difficulties in completing assignments are prevalent among online learners. Such findings emphasize that addressing technical barriers is crucial for supporting equitable access to online education (Bich & Lian, 2022). Ensuring a stable technical infrastructure and providing digital literacy training can potentially improve student experiences in online learning environments (Muslim, 2021; Uyun et al., 2023).

Lack of a Supportive Environment

Another prominent challenge involves the absence of a supportive learning environment, with students often facing external distractions, extended screen time, and insufficiently engaging instructional materials. Consistent with the work of Chi and City (2022) and Irza (2021), students reported that home environments were not conducive to focused learning due to various distractions and the absence of physical classroom settings. Widayanti and Suarnajaya (2021) identified internal and external factors impacting online learning, including motivation, study habits, financial constraints, and an environment unsuited for studying. Effective online learning environments must consider these factors, fostering a supportive atmosphere through structured schedules, engaging content, and efforts to reduce screen fatigue (Saud, 2021; Bhuana & Apriliyanti, 2021).

Lack of Interaction

The lack of real-time interaction was a recurring theme in this study. Students expressed concerns that limited interpersonal engagement adversely affected their learning experience and personal development. These findings mirror those of Purwanto et al. (2020) and Mahyoob (2020), who found that reduced student-student and teacher-student interactions are a key drawback of online education. Limited interaction not only impacts academic outcomes but also affects students' psychological well-being, as social engagement is critical to learning satisfaction (Azmat & Ahmad, 2022). Interactive platforms and real-time engagement opportunities, such as group discussions and collaborative projects, could mitigate these concerns, enhancing the social dynamics of online education (Geven, 2020; Lasfeto, 2020).

Low Motivation

Low motivation emerged as the most significant challenge in online learning. Students reported that the lack of physical presence and social accountability reduced their drive to engage with course material. Studies by Ying et al. (2021) and Tanveer (2016) corroborate this finding, identifying reduced motivation as a critical barrier in virtual education due to issues such as technological anxiety, limited social interaction, and absence of direct support. To address this, educators could incorporate motivational strategies such as gamification, goal-setting exercises, and regular feedback, as these methods have shown promise in improving engagement in virtual environments (Windyariai et al., 2023; Kuama & Intharaksa, 2016).

Solutions and Implications

The study suggests several practical solutions to enhance online learning experiences. Schindler (2017) recommends flexible approaches that allow students to access recorded materials asynchronously, which can alleviate stress associated with technical issues. Fostering positive mental health through mood management strategies, as Hewson (2018) suggests, may also mitigate feelings of isolation and monotony. Building interactive connections among students, joining online seminars, and ensuring thorough preparation for online classes are additional strategies that can enhance motivation and engagement (Radunzel, 2016; Reed, 2021).

This study's findings underscore the need for professional development for educators in managing virtual classrooms. Training should extend beyond technical skills to include innovative pedagogical methods and assessments tailored to online learning, as suggested by Kuama and Intharaksa (2016). Educators who adapt teaching strategies to virtual platforms—such as incorporating interactive multimedia, facilitating discussion forums, and using feedback loops—can foster an environment that supports engagement and motivation.

Methodological Reflection and Future Directions

This qualitative research approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges faced by students in online learning environments. The in-depth interviews provided a rich context to student experiences, allowing for the emergence of themes that may be overlooked in quantitative studies (Schindler, 2017). However, the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could benefit from mixed-methods research, combining qualitative insights with quantitative analysis to validate the prevalence and impact of these challenges across a broader sample (Reed, 2021).

In conclusion, this study highlights the pressing need for comprehensive support systems in online education. Addressing technical barriers, fostering supportive learning environments, enhancing interaction, and implementing motivation strategies can substantially improve the online learning experience. This research provides a foundation for developing evidence-based practices that adapt to the evolving demands of virtual education, contributing to enhanced student satisfaction and academic success.

4. CONCLUSION

. The findings of this study indicate that undergraduate students at Raden Fatah State University face notable challenges in an online learning environment, including technical issues with technology use, lack of support within their learning environments, limited interaction, and low motivation. To address these challenges effectively, students are encouraged to develop adaptability, prioritize their emotional well-being, build peer connections, participate in seminars, and prepare diligently for online classes. These strategies can help students enhance their resilience and capabilities in navigating online learning contexts.

While this study focused on identifying the obstacles students encounter and providing strategies to overcome them, the insights gained here can serve as a foundation for both students and educators. For students, understanding the factors that hinder their learning can empower them to make informed efforts to improve their engagement and performance. For educators, incorporating engaging, adaptable teaching methods tailored to the online environment can foster a more effective learning experience.

This study acknowledges certain limitations, such as the subjective nature of qualitative data, which may affect generalizability. Future research could benefit from a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to gain a more comprehensive and verifiable understanding of the challenges and effective strategies for online learning. Such an approach would allow for a richer analysis and broader applicability of the findings.

In summary, this research provides valuable insights into the complexities of the online learning transition for undergraduate students. It emphasizes the importance of ongoing dialogue within

scholarly communities, underscoring how collaboration and shared knowledge can contribute to the continuous improvement of educational practices in an evolving academic landscape.

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