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# The Shift from Face-To-Face to Online Tutorials since the Outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Assessing Learners' Perspectives at the Open University of Mauritius

**Ballah Permall, FHEA**
Lecturer
Communication, Media and Journalism
Open University of Mauritius
MAURITIUS

**Tomal K. Chadeea, FHEA**
Lecturer
Design and Multimedia
Open University of Mauritius
MAURITIUS

**Kaviraj S. Sukon, PFHEA**
Director General
Open University of Mauritius
MAURITIUS

## *Abstract*

*Since the outbreak of the pandemic of Covid-19, many higher educational institutions have forcefully shifted from face-to-face to online tutorials while adopting various online teaching tools. The Open University of Mauritius (OU) was no exception (Sukon, 2021). Unfortunately, there was little time to pilot these tools effectively and therefore, it is important to assess learners' perspectives of online tutorials. This study focused on undergraduate learners at OU who were attending online tutorials during the pandemic as the university had to swing entirely into this particular mode of delivery to ensure the continuity of its academic activities. A quantitative study was conducted among undergraduate learners of the BA (Hons) Communication, Media and Journalism, and BA (Hons) Graphic Design and Multimedia programmes enrolled at the OU up to January 2020. The results showed that there were six factors that encapsulated the students' perspectives. The most important were "Academic Benefits of Online Tutorials", "Advantages of Online Tutorials," and "Positive Contribution of Tutors". However, learners felt a lack of interaction during the online sessions. This research will help institutions and academics to better negotiate the shift to online teaching.*

***KEYWORDS***

*Covid-19, online tutorial, online learning, student engagement, distance learning, Open University.*

## Introduction

Since March 2020, the education system has been completely disrupted worldwide owing to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to the widespread closure of educational institutions (Sukon, 2021). However, to avoid strain during the pandemic season and comply with newly imposed restrictions, educational institutions have been compelled to adopt online teaching and learning (UNESCO, 2020). At the Open University of Mauritius (OU), a public university established in 2012, most programmes are offered through the open distance learning mode. During regular years under normal conditions, learners were allowed to attend five on-campus face-to-face tutorials on Saturdays for each module. During the lockdown, the OU had to cancel all face-to-face tutorials and shift entirely to online teaching to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning. However, this sudden shift could harm the teaching and learning, as both tutors and learners were accustomed to conventional face-to-face learning (Janmaimool & Nunsunanon, 2021; Nawi, Mohd Yusof, Kamaludin & Sain, 2021). Several major concerns in online classes during the pandemic period have been reported, including poor broadband internet services faced by tutees, an inauspicious home-learning environment, and the tutor's difficulty in promoting learners' engagement (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021; Sari & Nayir, 2020). Thus, an investigation of how learners perceive online tutorials is imperative to ensure the sustainability of this mode of learning at the OU, and eventually, to better support their online learning needs. Hence, the specific research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

- What benefits and shortcomings of online tutorials have been perceived by learners since the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Has there been a change in students' engagement in tutorials since the pandemic?
- In the future, would learners choose online tutorials over face-to-face ones?

## Literature Review

### *Face-to-Face vs Online Tutorials: Advantages and Shortcomings*

In an ODL setting, the face-to-face classroom tutorial is a live interaction between the tutor and learner, convened to bring clarifications on complex aspects of the course content, respond to learners' queries, encourage student participation, and provide instant feedback on assignments to make learning more meaningful (Motaung & Makombe, 2021). The face-to-face mode imparts richer interpersonal attention and interaction, facilitating social learning and engagement, as learners can connect with the tutor in person, formulate questions, debate, and receive instant feedback (Dommett, Gardner, & Van Tilburg, 2019). In contrast, online tutorials are unlikely to accommodate a high degree of social interactions. Effective peer support activities such as sharing study notes or explaining complex concepts to classmates are difficult to replicate. This leads to isolation and demotivation (Suresh, Vishnu, Priya, & Gayathri, 2018).



Online learning can be characterized as learning experiences where learners, although not physically present in a classroom but equipped with proper technological devices such as computers and internet connection, can interact synchronously or asynchronously with instructors and other learners (Singh & Turman, 2019). In such a virtual learning environment, effective learning can only occur if internet connections are reliable and learners have access to appropriate technological devices and are engaged in various ways (Janmaimool & Nunsunanon, 2021). In contrast, face-to-face instruction is not dependent on digital technologies, and some learners still lack the basic tools to participate in online classes, such as the availability of an appropriate computer with internet connection (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Furthermore, some tutors and learners still lack the necessary technical skills and appropriate competencies to use the specific digital tools offered by synchronous platforms to actively interact online (Ferri, Grifoni, & Guzzo, 2020). However, online education meets the needs of those who cannot commute to campus regularly, particularly ODL learners, due to professional, social, and family commitments (Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

***The Tutor as the Facilitator for the Success of Online Learning***

Though self-learning is of prime importance in an online learning system, learners rely on the support of knowledgeable tutors to facilitate meaningful deep learning and circumvent feelings of isolation (Motaung & Makombe, 2021). Despite physical separation from learners, tutors should do their best to create online face-to-face social interactions through the incorporation of collaborative learning tools such as chat sessions, forum discussions, group projects, polling, messaging, and seminars in the teaching and learning process (Boettcher and Conrad, 2021). The online learning platform is conducive to building an engaging community to enable learners to socialize with each other and exchange ideas, but provided that the instructor is sufficiently experienced in the use of those interactive tools (Dereshiwsky, 2021). Moreover, to positively enhance learners' performance, motivation, and satisfaction, tutors should provide timely and constructive feedback and establish and maintain regular contact with tutees through personal e-mails and phones (Alawamleh et al., 2020). In order, to adapt and interact with the virtual teaching and learning environment, it is strongly believed that a focused online tutorial training programme needs to be developed to help tutors acquire competencies, not only in the use of relevant software and interactive online tools but also in acquiring effective communication, problem-solving, administrative, and student counselling skills (Bean et al., 2019). Training the tutor as a facilitator to effectively utilise relevant ICT tools will serve to provide a great avenue for sharing ideas and experiences and predominantly resolve misunderstandings, thereby bridging the communication and psychological gap that may exist in an online learning setting (Motaung & Makombe, 2021).

Pg.3

**Methodology**

***Sampling***

In this cross-sectional study, 247 undergraduate learners in BA (Hons) Communication, Media, and Journalism, and BA (Hons) Graphic Design and Multimedia programs enrolled at the Open University of Mauritius up to January 2020 were selected. They attended face-to-face lectures and were, therefore, conversant with this mode of teaching but then transitioned to online learning in March 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In total, 115 questionnaires were retained for the survey.

***Data Gathering Instrument***

An anonymous online questionnaire was used for data collection. The online questionnaire was built through Google forms and then shared with learners through email with several reminders. Two experienced academics at OU reviewed the questionnaire for clarity, accuracy, and validity. The average time required to complete the questionnaire was 15 minutes. Data were collected during the post-pandemic period in August 2022. Almost all questions were selected from prior studies to reduce the risk of invalidity and unreliability, as shown in Annexe 1.

**Data Analysis**

***KMO and Bartlett's Test***

The KMO values shown in Table 2 confirm that the sample was adequate. Bartlett's test of sphericity confirmed that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix. This allowed us to proceed further with factor analysis.

**Table 2.** KMO and Bartlett's Test

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. | | 0.875 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 1747.857 |
| | df | 351 |
| | Sig. | 0.000 |

***Total Variance Explained***

Table 3 shows the six extracted factors. Together, these six factors explain 66.2% of the total variance.

**Table 3:** Total Variance Explained

| | Initial Eigenvalues | | | Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Component | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % |
| 1 | 10.124 | 37.495 | 37.495 | 5.493 | 20.346 | 20.346 |
| 2 | 2.103 | 7.788 | 45.283 | 4.833 | 17.899 | 38.245 |
| 3 | 1.907 | 7.064 | 52.347 | 3.471 | 12.854 | 51.099 |
| 4 | 1.371 | 5.077 | 57.424 | 1.410 | 5.223 | 56.321 |
| 5 | 1.245 | 4.611 | 62.035 | 1.393 | 5.160 | 61.481 |
| 6 | 1.116 | 4.133 | 66.168 | 1.265 | 4.687 | 66.168 |
| 7 | 0.957 | 3.546 | 69.713 | | | |
| 8 | 0.903 | 3.346 | 73.059 | | | |
| 9 | 0.757 | 2.805 | 75.864 | | | |
| 10 | 0.699 | 2.590 | 78.455 | | | |
| 11 | 0.662 | 2.450 | 80.905 | | | |
| 12 | 0.554 | 2.050 | 82.956 | | | |
| 13 | 0.539 | 1.995 | 84.950 | | | |
| 14 | 0.520 | 1.925 | 86.875 | | | |
| 15 | 0.492 | 1.822 | 88.697 | | | |
| 16 | 0.406 | 1.503 | 90.200 | | | |
| 17 | 0.375 | 1.389 | 91.589 | | | |
| 18 | 0.350 | 1.298 | 92.887 | | | |
| 19 | 0.326 | 1.206 | 94.093 | | | |
| 20 | 0.297 | 1.100 | 95.193 | | | |
| 21 | 0.256 | 0.950 | 96.143 | | | |
| 22 | 0.237 | 0.879 | 97.022 | | | |
| 23 | 0.217 | 0.805 | 97.827 | | | |
| 24 | 0.184 | 0.680 | 98.507 | | | |
| 25 | 0.160 | 0.594 | 99.102 | | | |
| 26 | 0.140 | 0.518 | 99.619 | | | |
| 27 | 0.103 | 0.381 | 100.000 | | | |

*Note. *Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis*

***Factor 1: Academic Benefits of Online Tutorials***

The first factor as illustrated in Table 4 below which we have called "Academic Benefits of Online Tutorials" explains 20.3% (see table 3) of the total variance in the responses. More than 60% of the respondents found that the shift to online teaching was beneficial and 80% found online learning to be more advantageous than face-to-face learning. In fact, learners were able to benefit from online Open Educational Resources (OERs) as they were embedded in the lesson. This integration of theoretical knowledge and practical applications makes tutorials more interesting. Moreover, most related real cases can be discussed online by visiting institutions' websites without infringing on copyright laws. This is reflected in the significant percentage of respondents who said that they agreed with the statement that they could access learning content at any time (84.3%).

**Table 4.** Rotated Component Matrix of Factor

| | Component 1 |
|---|---|
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be disadvantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Lack of practical applications]*** | 0.815 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be disadvantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Technical problems during internet connection]*** | 0.806 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be disadvantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Lack of interaction]*** | 0.782 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be disadvantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Harder to learn]*** | 0.777 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be disadvantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Less explanations given during classes]*** | 0.768 |
| It is difficult to focus during online classes compared to face-to-face classes. | -0.562 |
| Interacting with my tutors has become harder in online classes. | 0.556 |
| I am learning better now that I am taking my classes online. | 0.546 |
| I prefer taking online classes in the future. | 0.503 |

***Factor 2: Advantages of Online Tutorials***

The second factor illustrated in Table 5 and labelled as "Advantages of Online Tutorials" explains 17.9% (see table 3) of the total variances. Of the participants, 75.6% agreed that online tutorials provided them with the desired flexibility, and 84.3 % of the learners who participated in this survey agreed that following the adoption of online classes, they were better able to access more materials at any time and from anywhere. Thus, without such flexibility, they would not be able to shoulder their responsibilities at home, work, and in society. The age and gender distribution of the respondents, as shown in Figure 1, demonstrate that the majority are aged between 21-29 years and would most probably be part of the active working population with social, financial, and family obligations.

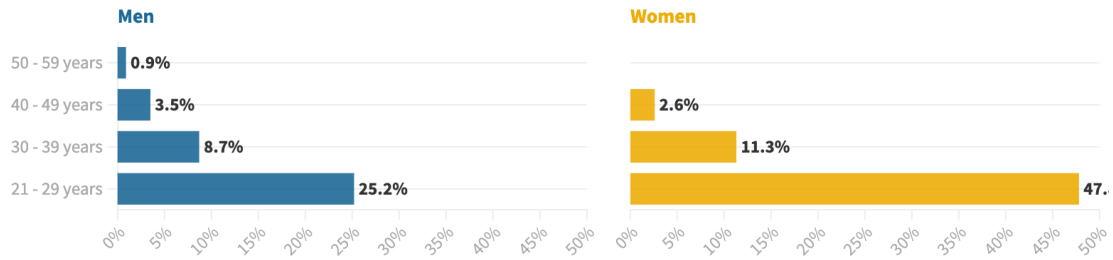


**Figure 1.** Age distribution of respondents

The fact that online tutorials allow learners to avoid travelling to university was nearly unanimously acclaimed. 67% found the online option to be more convenient, while 65.2% found it to provide more time to perform other tasks. The unprecedented increase in the number of vehicles and road networks has led to significant traffic congestion. Thus, learners spend a lot of time on the road attending tutorials. 79.1% said that online classes were not only the best way to protect them against the pandemic, but also ensured that they did not spread it.

**Table 5. Rotated Matrix of Factor 2**

| | Component 2 |
|---|---|
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be more advantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Flexibility]*** | 0.785 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be more advantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Lack of need to travel]*** | 0.749 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be more advantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Convenience]*** | 0.715 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be more advantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? [***Accessing course content anytime]*** | 0.675 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be more advantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Doing other activities at the same time]*** | 0.625 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be more advantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Health & Safety]*** | 0.603 |
| To what extent would you like to return to face-to-face learning? | 0.512 |
| To what extent do you consider online learning to be more advantageous as compared to face-to-face learning on the following factors? ***[Better structured class]*** | 0.507 |
| I feel more isolated now that I am taking online classes. | |

### *Factor 3: Positive Contribution of Tutors*

The third component as illustrated in Table 6 explains 12.9% (see table 3) of the total variance and has been labelled as "Positive Contribution of Tutors". 77% agreed that the tutors motivated them during the online classes and 67% affirmed that they could ask tutors questions during online sessions if they did not understand the instructional content. It is reassuring to note that 62.6% of respondents reported that they found their tutors more understanding and cooperative during the online sessions and also played a crucial role in effectively facilitating the course. However, only 33% asserted that academics were more enthusiastic about online learning and 36.5% of respondents stated that they could not discuss the content with their classmates as they would have

done when learning face-to-face on campus. Therefore, tutors must make extra efforts to boost interactions and prompt learners to participate through questions, discussions, participation in chat forums, and presentations. Thus, it is recommended that group discussions be included in online sessions.

**Table 6:** Rotated Matrix of Factor 3

| | Component 3 |
|---|---|
| The tutors motivated me to do my best. | 0.752 |
| Tutors are cooperative and more understanding of the hardships we faced as learners during the pandemic. | 0.751 |
| The tutors facilitated the course effectively during online learning. | 0.670 |
| Do you feel the tutors were enthusiastic about online teaching? | 0.548 |
| I am able to discuss content with classmates during online class. | -0.500 |
| I am able to ask the tutors questions during online classes if I do not understand the instructional content. | |

***Factor 4: Effort to Succeed in Online Learning***

The fourth component illustrated in Table 7 explains 5.2% (see table 3) of the total variance and is labelled 'Effort to Succeed in Online Learning'. Moreover, 71.3% reported that online learning does not require additional effort compared to face-to-face tutorials. In addition, the fact that 72% agreed that tutors personalized interactions with them whenever necessary indicates that if adequate effort is made by both tutors and learners during online learning, it can lead to comparable levels of academic learning and performance in both learning environments. The fundamental tenets of pedagogy and andragogy remain the same for both online and on-campus learning.

**Table 7.** Rotated Matrix of Factor 4

| | Component 4 |
|---|---|
| In comparison to face-to-face learning, the learning effort during online learning is: | -0.857 |

***Factor 5: Dedication and Self-Engagement***

The fifth factor illustrated in Table 8 explains 5.1% of the total variance and is labelled "Dedication and Self-Engagement". 71.3 % reported that online learning requires learners to be engaged and dedicated. The fact that 71% of respondents agreed that self-engagement and dedication are significant factors that contribute to online learning proves that they are aware that to thrive in an online learning setting, they should be capable of managing their learning by acquiring knowledge on their own and that self-directed and self-managed learning is critical. Learners must show the same level of seriousness that they would have shown during on-campus classes. During induction sessions, learners are advised to (1) learn through the online mode, (2) manage time so that they can learn while working and shouldering family and other commitments, and (3) maintain self-motivation.

**Table 8.** Rotated Matrix of Factor 5

| | Component 5 |
|---|---|
| Studying online requires lots of dedication and self-engagement. | 0.846 |

***Factor 6: Tutors' responsiveness***

The sixth factor illustrated in Table 9 explains 4.7% (see table 3) of the total variance has been labelled as "Tutors' responsiveness". 67% reported that tutors responded promptly to the learners' solicitations and queries.

**Table 9.** Rotated Matrix of Factor 6

| | Component 5 |
|---|---|
| Tutors responded promptly to my questions about course assignments. | 0.714 |

**Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations**

The adoption of online teaching has been rapid, but it is yet to be perfect and accepted by all learners. The key component that must be considered is that both learners and tutors must be fully trained before embarking on an online shift. At the outset, academic staff must be empowered to use various online collaborative and interactive learning tools so that they do not replicate the chalk-and-talk method online. Online learning materials must be carefully and purposefully developed or recommended so that the texts are accompanied by visuals, videos, and other open educational content that will help attract learners. Recorded online sessions provide opportunities to enrich pedagogy by allowing learners to access, view, and review tutorials at their convenience. The effective use of artificial intelligence may also help identify weaknesses among learners at an early stage and provide them with additional support. Additionally, tutors must not spare any efforts to motivate learners by engaging them in online activities. The tutorials and lessons must be planned in such a way that there are effective interactions between learners and tutors, as well as between learners. This can take several forms, starting with informal questions as part of formative assessment and asking learners to make group presentations online.

Learners have reported several advantages of online teaching, including flexibility, convenience, time saving, and better learning-work-life balance. Institutions that have opted for online teaching

and learning must optimize the benefits of this method by ensuring that learners are independent and never isolated. Virtual rooms to perform group activities are highly recommended to boost student-student interactions. Therefore, online teaching and learning must be thoroughly prepared to ensure students' success. It is worth noting that the sample of this study was confined to learners of BA (Hons) Communication, Media, and Journalism and BA (Hons) Graphic Design and Multimedia. It might be that the findings would have been different if the study had been carried out with a wider range of learners on various programmes of the OU. Furthermore, a survey could be conducted to ascertain tutors' perceptions of online tutorials and ways to improve their overall learning and teaching experiences.

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## Annexure 1

| Section 2 - Transition to Online Learning | Authors |
|---|---|
| I am learning better now that I am taking my classes online | Alawamleh, Al-Twait, and Al-Saht (2020) |
| I prefer taking online classes in the future. | Alawamleh, Al-Twait, and Al-Saht (2020) |
| Studying online require lots of dedication and self-engagement. | Self- developed |
| Ability to discuss content with classmates during class. | (Janmaimool and Nunsunanon, 2021) |
| I feel more isolated now that I am taking online classes. | Alawamleh, Al-Twait, and Al-Saht (2020) |
| It is difficult to focus during online classes compared to face-to-face classes. | Self-developed |
| According to you, what is the main advantage of e-learning as opposed to face-to-face learning?<br>● Health Safety<br>● Doing other activities at the same time<br>● Better structured class<br>● Flexibility<br>● Accessing courses anytime<br>● Lack of need to travel<br>● Convenience | Gherhes, Stoian, Farcasiu and Stanici, (2021) |
| According to you what is the main advantage of face-to-face learning as opposed to e-learning?<br>● Harder to learn<br>● Fewer explanations given during classes<br>● Lack of practical applications<br>● Technical problems during internet connection<br>● Lack of interaction | Gherhes, Stoian, Farcasiu and Stanici, (2021) |
| In comparison to face-to-face learning, the learning effort during e-learning is:<br>● Lower<br>● The same as during face-to-face learning<br>● Higher | Gherhes, Stoian, Farcasiu and Stanici, (2021) |
| To what extent would you like to return to face-to-face learning:<br>To a very small extent<br>To a small extent<br>To a moderate extent<br>To a large extent | Gherhes, Stoian, Farcasiu and Stanici, (2021) |

| | |
|---|---|
| To what extent would you like to return to face-to-face learning:<br><br>To a very small extent<br>To a small extent<br>To a moderate extent<br>To a large extent<br>To a very large extent | Gherhes, Stoian, Farcasiu and Stanici, (2021) |
| Section 3 - Quality of Tutorials Offered by Tutors | Authors |
| The instructor facilitated the course effectively | Gopal, Singh, Aggarwal (2021) |
| The instructor was enthusiastic about online teaching | Gopal, Singh, Aggarwal (2021) |
| Ability to ask the instructor questions during class if they did not understand the instructional content. | (Janmaimool and Nunsunanon, 2021) |
| The instructor responded promptly to my questions about course assignments | Gopal, Singh, Aggarwal (2021) |
| Interacting with my instructor has become harder in online classes | Alawamleh, Al-Twait, and Al-Saht (2020) |
| Instructors are being cooperative and more understanding of the hardships we are currently facing as learners | Alawamleh, Al-Twait, and Al-Saht (2020) |
| The instructor personalized interactions with me whenever necessary | Gopal, Singh, Aggarwal (2021) |
| The instructor motivated me to do my best | Gopal, Singh, Aggarwal (2021) |
| Section 4 - Technical Factors | Authors |
| I appropriate an appropriate device for online learning | Self- developed |
| My internet connection was appropriate for online learning | Self- developed |
| I am able to hear the instructor's explanations clearly | Janmaimool and Nunsunanon (2021) |
| I have sufficient computer knowledge and IT skills to manage my online learning | Almahasees, Mohsen and Amin, (2021) |
| Section 5 Online Learning Experience | Authors |
| How many online learning courses (short, medium or long) have you followed during the years 2015-2020? | Self-developed |
| How many times have you visited our online learning platform on average during a week? | Self-developed |
| Please rate your skills in using the following computer-related tools/software used during online learning. | Self-developed |
| State 2 online learning features you appreciated. | Self-developed |
| State 2 online learning features you would like to be changed immediately in order to improve online learning. | Self-developed |