AN EVALUATION ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS AT GOVERNMENT COLLEGES IN ZIMBABWE: A LECTURER AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of online learning for students in Zimbabwe. A lecturer perspective. A survey of two colleges in the Midlands province was undertaken. A survey of twenty students and ten lecturers (total thirty) from various departments revealed that online learning had its challenges to both students and the lecturers. Results of the study showed that most students were finding it hard to access online learning due to reasons that include lecturer and student attitudes, lack of know-how, poor network and the high costs of purchasing bundles. Most participants did not have access to Wi-Fi. Successful online programmes are influenced by availability of resources. The findings indicated that, in as much as the students and lecturers wanted to use online learning challenges were encountered and these hindered the success of online training programmes. Hence, for effective online learning programmes, assistive technology amongst other resources should be availed to staff and students.

Key Words: *Online Learning, Assistive Devices Policy Administration*

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INTRODUCTION

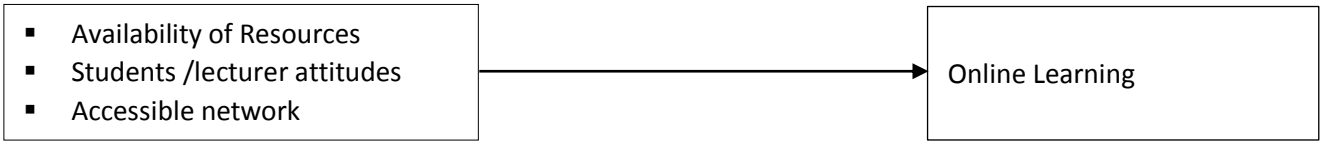
In the 20th century, institutions have tried to embrace the use of online learning to facilitate education from dispersed students, and to improve the education system. Most institutions have responded to this technological change by increasing class sizes, cutting programs, and otherwise seeking to reduce costs and improve efficiency. At the same time, institutions have sharply increased their distance education offerings through online coursework, though often with an intent to improve access and convenience for students rather than to reduce costs. In the wake of the recent recession, policy leaders in several states, assuming that online courses must be more cost effective than face-to-face courses, have championed further expansions in online learning (e.g., Chen, 2012; Fain & Rivard, 2013; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2011). The notion that online courses are more cost effective than traditional, face-to-face courses is predicated on two assumptions: first, that online course sections are consistently less expensive; and second, that they yield fairly comparable student outcomes, (Xu and Jaggers, 2013). Although it may seem self-evident that online courses are consistently cheaper than face-to-face courses, there is surprisingly little evidence on online and face-to-face course costs.

For the past years Africa has experienced a decline in disseminating of education knowledge to its students. Emanating from the sharp technological advancement experienced globally. This has called for a shift in the global economy in terms of accessing education. In Zimbabwe among other African countries, most students are not able to access education using the online platform. Reasons include lack of finance, some students living in areas without electricity and network boosters. Some come from very poor families; some do not have the knowledge on the use of online network.

To teachers also, disseminating information using this platform is a challenge as some of the students do not respond, fail to submit assignments rendering the work of the teacher null and void.

In the wake of COVID 19, it has called for institutions from primary to higher institutions of learning to adopt to the new way of learning in order for students to proceed with their education to the next level. In response to this COVID-19 pandemic, many universities and colleges want to put the brakes on children's futures, hence they are offering live classes and access to all of their services.Some of them offer their services for free whereas some of them charge for their classes.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions decided to adopt to the online model of learning so that they do not disturb students future endeavors, hence they are offering live classes and access to all of their services.



Independent variable **Dependent Variable**

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

There are various factors that affect Online learning for collegestudents in Zimbabwe. These have been outlined as predictors of online learning.

Online learning has become the new norm, as it lets institutions adapt to own timing and convenience. It also allows learning from anywhere and at any time. Some say that wisdom comes with age while others insist that it comes from learning. Nowadays, thanks to the internet, learning is open to all. Hence, people in the countries where traditional learning is facing various obstacles can take advantage of online courses. So far, online learning

has been effective to the people that understood its value. It offers the chance to have great results for lower costs and sometimes for no costs at all. Despite these, online learning has many other advantages. Education may have several purposes, and online learning help to fulfill it. Some even say that online learning can revolutionize education as it provides new opportunities for traditional learning.

The scope and availability of online offerings continues to expand globally. Demand for more intensive, short-term courses that provide opportunities for up-skilling has increased in the wake of massive open online courses (MOOCs), and this increased demand has in turn expanded the availability of online programs. As many as six million students in the USA were undertaking online education in 2015, with nearly five million of these students studying an undergraduate college (tertiary) qualification (Allen and Seaman, 2017). Similar trends have been noted in the Australian context. Recent scoping reports of the Australian Higher Education sector have highlighted continual, rapid growth in online enrollments, but also a degree of "blurring" of boundaries, due to the increased adoption of technologies to support the on-campus learning experience (Norton and Cherastidtham, 2014; Norton and Cakitaki, 2016).

Online modes of study have been found to be equivalent to on-campus environments with respect to key outcomes such as student academic performance (Magagula and Ngwenya, 2004; McPhee and Söderström, 2012) and student satisfaction (Palmer, 2012). However, online offerings also pose some key differences to on-campus modes of study. Accessing course materials online allows unprecedented levels of flexibility and accessibility for students from around the world and overcomes geographical barriers that might prevent students accessing on-campus course offerings (Brown, 1997, 2011; Bates, 2005). The nature of the online education environment also means that course delivery needs to compensate for the lack of immediate physical infrastructure, relying more heavily on asynchronous methods of communication. There is also emerging evidence that online student cohorts differ from on-campus cohorts with respect to factors such as age and work or family commitments (Bailey et al., 2014; Johnson, 2015), which also speaks to the demand for more flexible, career-driven online offerings. The requirements of online students as a distinct demographic are another factor for consideration when planning and developing an online course.

Furthermore, from a course development perspective, there is increasing understanding that developing online learning is more complex than merely translating written materials to an online format; it requires careful planning and maximization of available online technologies to cater for a variety of individual differences, student timetables and external commitments, and assessment modes (e.g., Rovai, 2003; Grant and Thornton, 2007; Rovai and Downey, 2010). Online learning does not only differ for students but also carries implications for instructors. Online instruction places varying demands on delivery and feedback methods and relies on different teacher knowledge and skills than face-to-face tuition (Alvarez et al., 2009). It is evident that a sensitive approach catering to both similarities and differences of both modes of study is warranted.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative approach. A cross-sectional survey design was used to gather data from a sample of respondents, lecturing staff and students, with the sole purpose of generalising the findings to the target population.

The target population consisted of students at colleges, in the Midlands province during 2020. Lecturers and students from the Engineering, Applied Sciences and Commerce divisions were the target population. A sampling frame of thirty (30) respondents was extracted from the target population of colleges in the Midlands Province. A

total of twenty (20) were students and ten (10) were lecturing staff. Simple Random technique and convenient sampling was used to come out with the sample under study.

Data was collected using structured questionnaires. Thirty (30) questionnaires were distributed to the respondents over a period of one week in July 2020. The questionnaires were personally distributed and collected from the respondents. There was a 100%response rate. Permission to conduct the study was sought from and granted by the concerned college authorities. Informed consent for participation was obtained from the respondents. The respondents were assured of the privacy and confidentiality of their contributions. No rewards were offered to the respondents for participating in the study.

The research questionnaire comprised of two sections. The items in the first section solicited data on the respondents' demographic details while those included in section Bwere challenges encountered by the respondents during online programmes and ways of improving online learning were substantiated. The Likert scale as a measurement tool was used to ascertain responses and these were put on a scale that ranged from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree").

FINDINGS

Responses from students

Table 1: Division of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Applied Sciences	4	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Engineering	10	50.0	50.0	70.0
	Commerce	3	15.0	15.0	85.0
	Other	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 depicts the various divisions for the study meaning that all the students in various colleges were considered in the sample.

Table 2: Qualification of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Undergraduate	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	HND	8	40.0	40.0	45.0
	ND	2	10.0	10.0	55.0
	NC	9	45.0	45.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 indicated the level of education, that the respondents were capable of contributing to the research under study and they had acquired the basics of computer and technological know-how on online learning.

Table 3: Period of using online learning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2 months	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	3 months	9	45.0	45.0	50.0
	over 3 months	8	40.0	40.0	90.0
	have never used	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 showed that most respondents had been introduced to the online learning platform and the information they gave were viable for the research.

Table 4: Location of Respondent

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Gweru	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
	Lower Gwelo	1	5.0	5.0	70.0
	Kwekwe	2	10.0	10.0	80.0
	Zhombe	2	10.0	10.0	90.0
	Bindura	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 illustrated that most respondents were located in Gweru, though a few came from surrounding areas, their comments were effective and valid for the research study.

Table 5: Frequency of lectures

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	once a week	4	20.0	20.0	20.0
	2 times a week	4	20.0	20.0	40.0
	3 times a week	4	20.0	20.0	60.0
	4 times a week	2	10.0	10.0	70.0
	5 times a week	5	25.0	25.0	95.0
	more than 5 times	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The table above indicated that lectures were frequently done online in colleges.

Challenges encountered during online learning

Table 6: Accessibility of network

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	5	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Unsure	2	10.0	10.0	35.0
	Agree	8	40.0	40.0	75.0
	Strongly Agree	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The above table shows that network is a major challenge among the students to do their online learning.

Table 7: Electrical power cuts/ load shedding

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	20.0
	Unsure	3	15.0	15.0	35.0
	Agree	11	55.0	55.0	90.0
	Strongly Agree	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Most respondents highlighted that electrical power cuts and load shedding made it difficult for them to do online learning.

Table 8: Lecturer negative attitudes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	Disagree	13	65.0	65.0	80.0
	Unsure	2	10.0	10.0	90.0
	Agree	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 8 indicated that most lectures do not have a negative attitude towards online learning, though only 10% indicated that some lecturers had a negative attitude.

Table 9: Lack of team work among students

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	4	20.0	20.0	30.0
	Unsure	1	5.0	5.0	35.0
	Agree	10	50.0	50.0	85.0
	Strongly Agree	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The above table shows that 50% and 15% (65%) of the respondents indicated that there was no teamwork among students.

Table 10: Lack of Cooperation and coordination among students

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	6	30.0	30.0	40.0
	Unsure	1	5.0	5.0	45.0
	Agree	9	45.0	45.0	90.0
	Strongly Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 10 shows that there is lack of cooperation and coordination among student for online learning to be effective

Table 11: Poor Communication and dissemination of information

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	6	30.0	30.0	40.0
	Unsure	2	10.0	10.0	50.0
	Agree	9	45.0	45.0	95.0
	Strongly Agree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The table above shows that 50% (45% plus 5%) of the respondents stated that there was poor communication and dissemination of information for online learning to be effective.

Table 12: Lack of technical expertise on online programs

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Disagree	3	15.0	15.0	20.0
	Unsure	3	15.0	15.0	35.0
	Agree	10	50.0	50.0	85.0
	Strongly Agree	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The table above illustrates that 65% (50% +15%) of the respondents found that technical expertise was a challenge to effectively do online learning programmes.

Table 13: Lack of Finance

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Unsure	3	15.0	15.0	20.0
	Agree	11	55.0	55.0	75.0
	Strongly Agree	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 13 shows that 80% (55% + 25%) of the respondents faced a challenge of finances to do online learning.

Table 14: Attending lectures on a regular basis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Disagree	6	30.0	30.0	35.0
	Unsure	5	25.0	25.0	60.0
	Agree	7	35.0	35.0	95.0
	Strongly Agree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

40% (35% +5%) of the respondents stated that attending lectures on a regular basis was difficult, whilst 35% (30% +5%) disagreed that it was not a challenge.

Table 15: Frequency of lectures

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Unsure	2	10.0	10.0	40.0
	Agree	11	55.0	55.0	95.0
	Strongly Agree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

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Table 16: Time Management of lectures

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	Unsure	2	10.0	10.0	25.0
	Agree	14	70.0	70.0	95.0
	Strongly Agree	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The above tables indicate that there was a challenge of lectures that they were not attended frequently and time management was not done effectively.

Ways of improving online learning

Table 17: Providing Assistive devices

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	Unsure	3	15.0	15.0	30.0
	Agree	10	50.0	50.0	80.0
	Strongly Agree	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Most respondents indicated that providing assistive devices helps in improving online learning.

Table 18: Creating accessible content

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Unsure	1	5.0	5.0	10.0
	Agree	13	65.0	65.0	75.0
	Strongly Agree	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Seventy five percent of the respondents suggested creating an accessible content as a way of improving online learning.

Table 19: Consistency in providing lectures

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Unsure	1	5.0	5.0	10.0
	Agree	16	80.0	80.0	90.0
	Strongly Agree	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Consistency in providing lectures helps in improving online learning.

Table 20: Providing Data Bundles

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	15.0
	Unsure	1	5.0	5.0	20.0
	Agree	11	55.0	55.0	75.0
	Strongly Agree	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Providing data bundles helps in improving online learning.

Responses from Lecturers

Table 21: Division of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Applied Sciences	4	40.0	40.0	40.0
	Engineering	2	20.0	20.0	60.0
	Commerce	4	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

The Table 21 reflects that all department were represented and that the information they gave was valuable for the research study.

Table 22: Level of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Postgraduate	4	40.0	40.0	40.0
	Undergraduate	5	50.0	50.0	90.0
	HND	1	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Most respondents had attained higher level of education and information they gave was of intellectual capacity.

Table 23: Respondents' experience

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 1 year	9	90.0	90.0	90.0
	3 years	1	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Ninety percent of the respondents had less that 1 year knowledgeable on online teaching.

Table 24: Location of respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Gweru	9	90.0	90.0	90.0
	Lower Gwelo	1	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

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90% of the respondents were located in Gweru and they did their online teaching in Gweru.

Table 25: Frequency of Lectures

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	once a week	3	30.0	30.0	30.0
	2 times a week	2	20.0	20.0	50.0
	3 times a week	1	10.0	10.0	60.0
	5 times a week	3	30.0	30.0	90.0
	more than 5 times	1	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Table 25 indicate that lectures were held frequently during the week.

Challenges encountered by lectures

Table 26: Network not easily accessible

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Disagree	2	20.0	20.0	40.0
	Unsure	1	10.0	10.0	50.0
	Agree	3	30.0	30.0	80.0
	Strongly Agree	2	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Table 26 indicates that there is a network challenge in some areas which makes it difficult for online lessons to be carried out.

Table 27: Power cuts/ load shedding

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	2	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Disagree	3	30.0	30.0	50.0
	Unsure	1	10.0	10.0	60.0
	Agree	3	30.0	30.0	90.0
	Strongly Agree	1	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Some of the respondents indicated that there were poor cut that made it difficult for online lessons to be effective.

Table 28: Student negative attitudes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	1	10.0	10.0	20.0
	Unsure	2	20.0	20.0	40.0
	Agree	3	30.0	30.0	70.0
	Strongly Agree	3	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Students negative attitude contribute to failure to achieve online programs.

Table 29: Lack of finance

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Disagree	1	10.0	10.0	20.0
	Unsure	1	10.0	10.0	30.0
	Agree	1	10.0	10.0	40.0
	Strongly Agree	6	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Table 29 depict that finance is a major challenge for online learning.

Table 30: Students not attending lecture regularly

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Unsure	1	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Agree	5	50.0	50.0	60.0
	Strongly Agree	4	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Ninety percent of the students do not attend lectures regularly and this is a challenge on online learning.

Table 31: Institution does not give enough resources

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Agree	3	30.0	30.0	40.0
	Strongly Agree	6	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Seventy percent of the respondents reflect that enough resources are not availed for the lectures to effectively do online learning.

Ways of improving online learning

Table 32: Providing assistive devices

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Unsure	1	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Agree	4	40.0	40.0	50.0
	Strongly Agree	5	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Most respondents indicated the need to provide assistive devices and data bundles.

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Table 33: Consistent monitoring to ensure efficiency

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Agree	5	50.0	50.0	60.0
	Strongly Agree	4	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	10	100.0	100.0	

Table 33 illustrates that there should be consistent monitoring to ensure efficiency on online learning.

Discussion

The need to adopt to online learning has been seen as significant in achieving educational programmes of learning in Africa as well as throughout the world. Many people believe that the move to online learning may bring a productive outcome with significant benefits. Integration of information technology in education will be further accelerated and that online education will eventually become an integral component of school education. From literature and the findings, it is evident that institutions need to adopt to new ways of learning as a way of effectively reinforcing learning and complementing gaps that may have emerged in learning programmes. There is consensus in prior literature that effective online instruction requires a more flexible approach to skill development, due to the variety of roles and skills applied in online contexts (Bawane and Spector, 2009). Key environmental differences between online and on-campus learning environments also necessitate the development of different online teaching competencies.

In an endeavor to embrace online learning there are a number of challenges encountered by students and these include inadequate resources like finance, network not readily accessible due to location, electrical power cuts, students and lecturer attitudes and frequency of lectures. These challenges hinder effective online programmes for both the students and the lecturers to teach on line.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Online learning is a modern-day way of learning thereby eliminating discrepancies in acquiring knowledge for students in dispersed locations. As online modes of study continue to expand, there is increasing awareness of the need for competent online instructors. Developing institutional competence for online instruction requires a careful approach to training online instructors and a workload investment in staff training and development (Gregory and Lodge, 2015). While it is acknowledged that face-to-face teaching competencies such as knowledge of curricula and pedagogy do transfer to online contexts, it is also important to recognize the unique competencies required for online teaching success, and the role of institutions in setting instructor duties and responsibilities (Alvarez et al., 2009). Despite much prior research attention exploring the notion of online student readiness, online instructor readiness is now emerging as an equally important construct (Oomen-Early and Murphy, 2009).

The ability to effectively communicate, manage technology, and deliver and assess content becomes especially important in intensive online environments, where there is less available time to acclimatize to new tools and operating environments. The monitoring of student progress, identification, and follow-up of issues or barriers are also critical duties for instructors to minimize the likelihood of student disengagement or withdrawal.

Online learning systems employ a variety of online tools, systems, and software, which place new

demands on the technical competence of instructors (Volery and Lord, 2000). Modes of communication also differ in online courses, with a greater reliance on asynchronous communication methods (Hung et al., 2010). Live, "virtual" classrooms may also involve remote but instant methods of feedback between student and instructor, facilitated through live chat, video/webcam interactions, and small-group "break-out rooms." The development of student rapport also differs in online contexts, and the nature of how rapport is initiated and maintained in online settings is not always easily comparable to face-to-face teaching. Naturally, assessment and feedback are also delivered in different ways *via* asynchronous methods when teaching online. Clear assessment practices, including communication of deadlines and assessment requirements, have been found to positively influence student engagement and course completion (Thistoll and Yates, 2016).

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