

Remote Online Teaching (ROT) in response to COVID-19 pandemic: Exploring instructors' experience

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ABSTRACT *Background: Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world has experienced a rapid, mass university closure and a forced transition to online teaching to minimise disruptions to the academic year. The quick transition from in-person to online teaching is presumed to be a challenging endeavour for many novice online instructors, and it is a 'grand experiment' that needs to be explored. Purpose and Research question: The aim of this research was to explore the Maldivian instructors' experience of the COVID-19 forced transitioning to remote online teaching. The research was guided by five central questions intended to gauge information focusing on teaching and learning and assessment strategies, support received, challenges and concerns, students' reactions to the new learning experience, and recommendations from the instructors. Methodology: The study followed a qualitative multiple-case study approach exploring the emergency remote online teaching experience of 7 instructors from three different higher education institutions that adopted a remote online learning strategy to allow educational continuity. Participants were selected through purposive convenience and snowball sampling method. The source of data for this research was a completed semi-structured interview questionnaire and a phone interview conducted to confirm the information provided when deemed necessary. Manual thematic coding was applied to analyse open responses, and precoded aspects adopted from literature were analysed for its absence or presence in each of the cases. Cross and within case and institution analysis was performed to enable a coherent discussion. Findings: The findings of the study revealed that many instructors adopted a variety of strategies fit for an emergency online learning context and the main form of support was focused on technology integration rather than online pedagogy. The main concerns identified related to student disengagement, instructor and student readiness and scepticism around online teaching influenced by traditional pedagogy. Conclusion and recommendations: Going forward, online teaching has to be carefully planned, systematically designed, to be effective. Instructors need to be supported to reformulate their teaching philosophy and develop competencies necessary for online teaching.*

KEYWORDS *online teaching, remote online teaching, COVID-19 and online teaching, online learning*

Following the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak in December 2019 throughout China and the rest of the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). As a containment measure, beyond China and across the world, 61 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America announced or implemented school and university closures leaving 1.3 billion learners, as of April 4 2020, affected and out of school and universities across the world (UNESCO, 2020a; UNESCO, 2020b and UNICEF, 2020). Mass university shutdown due to a threat and employing rapid online learning as a response is not a common occurrence. In the past, isolated cases of forced university closure due to protests, political agitation and terrorist attacks have been reported. One such example is the university closure experienced by South Africa from 2015–2017 caused by student protests. During this period, online learning was adopted as a solution to combat the disruption to educational continuity (Czerniewicz et al., 2019). More recently, Hong Kong experienced a similar situation when universities were forced to close and to adopt online learning strategies amid mass protests in the city (Cheng, 2019). In comparison, today due to COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world has experienced a rapid mass university closure and a forced transition to online teaching to minimise disruptions to the academic year (Crawford et al., 2020). This shift has had a great impact on the teaching and learning process in universities across the globe. In fact, teaching in many universities may have changed more in the first few months of 2020 than ever before. It is, however, important to note that not all universities announced a move to online instruction because of COVID-19 (Crawford et al., 2020). Some in fact, like the two public universities in the Maldives, implemented a shutdown or postponement strategy until lockdown was eased. The following sections briefly cover the technology adoption trend before the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of making a distinction between emergency remote online teaching, normal online teaching and distance education.

Technology adoption in higher education prior to COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning adoption in its various modes has been increasing steadily worldwide (USA, India, Asia and Middle East, Australia and New Zealand, and Africa), and was expected to become mainstream by 2025 (Hughes, 2018; Palvia, et al., 2018). Bastrikin (2020) has reported that in America alone, 6.6 million college students were enrolled in one or more online courses in 2017. There is also evidence of increased adoption of online learning by academics. For example, the 2019 Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology (Lederman, 2019), reported an increase in the proportion of faculty who had taught an online course from 20% in 2013 to 46% in 2019 in the United States. However, according to the same survey findings, many academics continued to harbour a high level of scepticism around online learning. During the COVID-19 impacted period, a large number of traditional universities that kept online teaching at bay enforced by an institutionalized value placed on physical classroom-based teaching, have been forced to shift learning online. Many instructors have been plunged into this virtual world with little or no experience of online teaching and

online pedagogy (Lim, 2020). Therefore, this forced shift from classroom to cloud can be a challenging and a frustrating experience for many such instructors.

Remote online teaching and emergency online teaching - making the distinction

As higher education institutions in the world adopt 'online teaching' to combat the emergency crisis, many proponents of online education and distance education have highlighted the importance of making a distinction between 'normal online learning' (Hodges et al., 2020), 'distance education' and 'remote online teaching' (Bozkurt et al., 2020) and which is being experienced during the COVID-19 emergency online teaching period. They argue that making this distinction is important, since a poor impression gained from the emergency remote online teaching (EROT) which has resulted from fast and rapid shift to remote online teaching with bare minimum resources and scant time can develop a poor understanding of what actually constitutes as 'normal online learning'. In addition, there is a fear of the current practices being normalised and sold as normal 'online learning' (Hodges, et al., 2020). They elaborated that well-planned online learning experiences are "meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster". Moreover, Robert and Dousay (2015), emphasized that effective online learning results from careful instructional design and planning using a systematic model for design and development, and this design process has an impact on the quality of the instruction delivered. In such cases, online learning design moderation variable such as modality, pacing, student-instructor ratio, pedagogy, role of online assessments, role of instructor online, student role online, online communication synchrony, source of feedback will be considered in the planning and evaluation process to make a quality judgement of the designed and delivery of online courses (Bakia, and Murphy, 2014). These important variables are likely to be absent in EROT strategy (Hodges et al., 2020). Bozkurt et al., (2020, p.2) made a distinction between 'distance education' and 'emergency remote teaching'. According to them, by definition, "distance education is characterized by the distance in time and/or space between learners and learning resources. While remote education refers to spatial distance, distance education considers distance within the perspective of different angles and strives to explain it through transactional distance." In addition, Moore (1993) and Riggs (2020) have strongly emphasised the value distance education model place on enhancing the different types of interactions between learners and instructors to increase student engagement in the learning process and to mitigate the effects of transactional distance. In this sense, it can be concluded that 'online distance education' and 'emergency remote teaching' are not the same things. Furthermore, Golden (2020) asserts that what is currently being done, emergency remote online teaching, should be considered a temporary solution to an immediate problem rather than 'distance online teaching' in its actual form and vigour.

COVID-19 and online teaching trend in the Maldives

In the Maldives, universities and colleges were forced to shut down on March 14, 2020 (The Edition, 2020). This forced many higher education institutions to adopt an Emergency Remote Online Teaching (EROT) strategy to mitigate the educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, online learning has suddenly become crucial and instructors have been forced to finish their syllabuses and continue to teach, and administer tests, using the available technology remotely from home. Interestingly, while the two well-resourced and government-funded public universities in the country shut down all its operation during the initial phase of the lockdown period, most of the private higher education institutions moved to emergency online remote teaching. For many institutions and instructors, it is a new experience. What a few weeks seemed unimaginable is now a reality for many instructors: teach fully online while struggling with technical and other practical challenges during the transition. Prior to the pandemic, adoption of online teaching in higher education delivery was slow in the Maldives, and hence, not widely practiced and encouraged as evidenced by the lack of national and institutional online learning standards. Though a few institutions in the Maldives have online learning infrastructure with Learning Management Systems (LMS) and synchronous tools integrated in course delivery, they are also not widely used. Therefore, it can be assumed, when the COVID-19 hit the country, the potential and affordances of online learning is yet to be explored by the higher education sector of the Maldives.

The question which arises now is: what are the real challenges of online teaching and learning during this crisis and how are instructors' capability developed to deal with the existing technology? The transition from in-person to online teaching is not an easy task and for many instructors even in the developed world, there exists a huge learning curve that can be challenging (Mukherjee, 2020). In addition, many higher education institutions do not have the required infrastructure or resources to facilitate online teaching with immediate effect (Dill, Fischer, McMurtrie and Supiano, 2020). Instructors in this context may lack the training needed for quality online learning. Normally, developing online courses involves a team of experts including academics, instructional designers, programmers and illustrators who will collectively follow a systematic design process (Lee, 2020). In this quick transition, instructors who have never taught online will be offering courses that have not been developed in this way. As a researcher working on the use of online learning in higher education, this shift from classroom to cloud is 'a grand experiment' on online teaching and a great opportunity to explore the impact of it.

There are no published studies on remote online teaching based on Maldivian context, especially studies on the experience of online instructors. This research was aimed at exploring online instructors' experience of the COVID-19 forced shift to online teaching with a focus on gauging information on the technological pedagogical practices, identification of support provided by the institution, challenges faced during experience, how students are coping and recommendations made by the instructors. The research was guided by five central questions: (1) What are the pedagogical practices that the instructors employed in their online teaching? (2) What type of institutional support did the instructors get in preparation for and during the forced transition to online teaching? (3) What are the challenges and

concerns experienced by the instructors? (4) how are students coping with the new learning experience? (5) What are the recommendations the instructors have to offer for prospective online instructors in similar situations?

Literature Review

At this point in time there is limited reliable data about the number of university instructors who have been using technology for ‘remote teaching’ during crises and about their success. However, there are few survey results and anecdotal evidence published in online magazines and academic blogs on how institutions, students and instructors have experienced remote online learning modality during COVID-19 pandemic shutdown period. Most of the evidence has been generated through surveys and is based on the United states and the European context.

1. Instructors’ experience of remote online teaching

Two broad survey results on instructors’ experience of COVID-19 remote online teaching experience has been made available for reference. First, a survey conducted by Bay View Analytics in partnership with six leading academic organizations investigated the concerns and needs of 826 U.S. higher education faculty and administrators from over 641 different institutions (Lederman, 2020b). According to the findings, a majority (56%) reported having used ‘new teaching methods’ in transitioning their courses to remote delivery. The list of the changes faculty made when moving classes online, included: changing the kind of assignments or exams given (63%), lowering expectations about student workload (43%), allowing students the option to choose pass/fail instead of a A-F grade for the semester (47%), dropping some assessments or exams (46%), lowering expectations about the quality of work that students will be able to do (32%) and dropping some of the readings that was originally assigned for students to do (17%). It is interesting to find that almost two third of the respondents reported changing the types of assessments or exams given to students, and nearly half reported about lowering their expectations regarding the amount of work students would be able to do (48%). This is problematic since it alludes to a more lenient education delivered to the students, and in the long run can be associated with normal online learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Most significantly, a variation in expectations in this regard was observed with instructors who had previous online teaching experience and those with no prior online teaching experience. Instructors with previous online experience were 15% less likely than their peers to lower their expectations for workload given to students, and also are less likely to change the nature of the assignments given to students.

In addition, the same survey results revealed different forms of assistance professors see as critical to support the delivery of a quality educational experience to their students. Information on how best to support remote students (64%) and a webcast for students on how to succeed in online classes (54%) were the top-rated options. In addition, they highlighted the following as important: greater access to online digital materials (61%), information on best practices

on how to support faculty working from home (57%), advice on how to adhere to accessibility requirements when moving online (55%), training materials for faculty on how to move courses to online (53%), an online resources hub with links to information about how to quickly transition to online learning (51%), shared emergency plans from other institutions (49%), webinars hosted by online learning experts for faculty on how to move courses to online (44%) support for managing organisational change at the respective institutions (33%) assistance with technology to support online education (37%), Webinars hosted by online learning experts for institutional leaders (36%), and one to one consultation with online learning experts (18%).

The survey respondents also revealed that many were experiencing a high level of anxiety and feeling of unpreparedness, uncertainty and concern around effective student engagement and success (Lederman, 2020a). Similar findings were reported in another global survey conducted by Watermeyer et al., (2020), with half of the respondents expressing doubt about students being able to access and meaningfully engage with online materials. This survey received data from 1013 academics from the UK, 79 from US and 73 from EU countries respectively. The survey identified several contributing factors leading to the increased anxiety. Some of the factors highlighted in this regard included: level of confidence in teaching online, the level of working knowledge of the technology used to support learning, teaching and assessment online LT& A, the home environment and being on call 24/7. For example, many respondents, mostly female, have indicated teaching from home as a challenge and expressed concerns related to the difficulties in balancing caring responsibilities and work-related responsibilities. 80% of the respondents found being constantly inundated with electronic contact “overloading and mentally exhausting”.

Fear of deskilling and sense of deprofessionalisation and a possible future obsolescence are other distress causing variables highlighted by the respondents of the survey (Watermeyer, et al., 2020). In fact, only a slim majority of the respondents spoke positively of the support received from their institutions in making an online move, as reflected in this typical statement; “What we’re doing isn’t even online teaching – it’s disaster management,” (Watermeyer, et al., 2020). However, a few did express positive views regarding the transition to online teaching. They argued that the transitioning to online teaching is necessary and declared this move as an overdue change. They also voiced concerns over the long-held academics’ resistance to this change. What is evident from the different perspectives is the existing need to transform the academics’ mindset towards learning, teaching and assessment in the new age, and to prepare them for the change.

2. Institutional guiding principles, strategies employed during the emergency remote online teaching

A study by (Crawford et al., 2020) has provided a brief analysis of the experience of a series of universities from 20 countries from different regions of the world including America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Middle East, Australia. The paper highlighted that most of the universities rapidly closed their face-to-face operations and moved to digitalised education. The following country cases provide a summary of insights derived from other published sources.

Lessons learned from the United States (US)

An article published by Inside Higher Ed by Lederman (2020b), presents views of 10 experts from the US in response to four questions posed by the author around remote online teaching as a result of COVID-19 crisis. The experts' accounts revealed ethics of care and compassion and commitment to student learning as central to the rhetoric of education delivery during the COVID-19 impacted period in most of the universities. Universities during this period are therefore, reportedly emphasizing empathy and flexibility over perfectionism and excellence. In this regard, decisions regarding student attendance, deadlines, exams to modalities of communication have been made more flexible during this period. Emergency policies about P/F, withdrawals, also reflect the ethics of care integrated into policy applicable to this period. Majority of the universities, according to the experts, encouraged faculty to minimise the synchronous sessions as a way to lessen the burden of the disadvantaged students whose internet infrastructure is poor, and the staff who are wrestling with low bandwidth and needing to care for family members. Joshua R. Eyles, from University of Mississippi (Lederman, 2020a) highlighted the emergence of a new norm of resource sharing practice across the country that was previously impossible due to the existing silos that are traditionally embedded within institutions of higher education (Lederman, 2020a). In the US, most universities focused more on providing and supporting a more responsive and equitable education delivery approach as reflected in one expert's statement; "my design will have a strategic, empathy-minded approach that emanates kindness, care and flexibility," (Lederman, 2020a).

Lessons from Italy

Linney (2020) interviewed six Rectors from Italian colleges with the aim to gauge information on processes and alternative learning options implemented as a result of the COVID-19 forced shutdown. Some of the strategies employed by the Italian universities included: (1) planned and organized online training courses and video tutorials to ensure that the instructors and students understand the tools available, (2) implemented online education by delivering 100% of the lessons via online streaming - lessons were not recorded but delivered in real time via tablets, with the use of webcams. In some cases, professors were allowed to give lessons on site in dedicated and fully equipped rooms, according to their needs, (3) implemented and strengthened several technical options to connect students and faculties, including Google Meet, Moodle, Classroom, and YouTube dedicated channels, (4) made classrooms entirely virtual, using live streaming to interact with classes and to group students in working groups to be followed online. Rector of University of Padua, Rosario Rizzuto reported a positive response to online teaching activities from both students and staff. According to him, staff has been required to make an extra effort to redesign teaching materials and record classes, with no delay on the academic calendar nor any reduction in the course content. He highlighted that students have shown high attendance rates and are performing very well during the exams. Among the drawbacks, he highlighted the difficulties in re-adapting written and quantitative exams and securing the development of practical activities

conducted within the laboratories. The Italian experience is worth studying because, as emphasised by a few Rectors, they revealed that a smooth transition to online teaching has been possible because many universities have been engaged in innovative teaching for years, through dedicated centres that excel in leveraging digital technology. In the Italian case, the main focus of many universities was on resilience and innovation (Crawford et al., 2020).

Lessons from Singapore

Singapore adopted an interesting strategy to minimise the disruption to higher education delivery. As highlighted by Lim, (2020), Singapore employed a whole university approach combined with a clear communication strategy to ensure an equitable, accountable and a quality learning experience to students affected by the COVID-19. According to her, the universities focused on: (1) adopting a consistent, whole university approach, (2) ensuring learning outcomes were uncompromised, (3) remaining student-centric, (4) having clear frequent communication, (5) making training available in all shapes and sizes, (6) addressing equity while considering flexibility, care for students along with quality and accountability. Many universities in Singapore used web-conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Webinar, as both contingency measures, as an integrated part of the learning management systems (Crawford, et al., 2020).

3. Student experience of emergency remote online teaching

Several COVID-19 student impact surveys, mostly conducted in the beginning of the university shutdown period, have emerged (Lederman 2020c; OneClass Blog, 2020; Patch, 2020; Pinkus, 2020; Top Hat, 2020). These survey findings, mainly based in the United States, showed that the majority of the students have developed a poor impression of the educational value they received during the emergency remote online teaching period and are dissatisfied with their learning experience (OneClass, 2020 & Lederman 2020c). However, according to Lederman (2020c), it is important to note that most of the surveys only skimmed the surface of the experience and were conducted during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. TopHats(2020) conducted a nationwide survey on remote online learning experienced by students in North America. Most students out of the 3,089 students who responded saw value in the online method of instruction. However, the survey findings revealed that many students who are learning remotely online in this period were feeling anxious (52%), worried (38%) and nervous (37%). Over 75% highlighted “lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and students during class” as a difficulty in adjusting to online learning. 75% also indicated that they “miss access to study spaces” and 62% reported lacking “regular and reliable access to a quiet study space.” 77% reported online course experience not engaging due to “lack of an engaging in-class experience”.

OneClass survey (2020) also reaffirms the fact the transition to online learning has not gone very smoothly for many students. From the 1,287 student responses received, some of the reasons underpinning student dissatisfaction and hence, worth highlighting include: (1) not getting the curriculum they expected, (2) the

big learning curve related to the new technology, (3) unfamiliarity with the tools, technologies and engagement practices by both students and instructors (4) the lack of face-to-face interaction, (5) distracting home environment, (6) motivation and focus problems and (7) worry and anxiety over getting poor grades and GPA. Top concerns associated with the shift from in-person classes to distance learning reported by the survey conducted by Pinkus (2020) are; (1) keeping up with coursework (45%), (2) losing contact with professors/instructors (33%), (3) being physically isolated from classmates (31%) and (5) juggling other priorities (e.g. child care, family care (30%).

Lederman (2020c), has highlighted student reported factors contributing to student dissatisfaction and anxiety. In this regard, the teaching strategies, unsuitable home environment, issues related to access to technology and course delivery and design are some factors identified as factors which had played a prominent role in causing students pretransition anxiety. Communication, flexibility, structure are some straits that students identified as critical for their learning and to help reduce the anxiety related to learning online remotely. For example, many students cited a “well-structured LMS,” or learning management system as beneficial since it helped to make the learning process less complex. For many students, when course pages in Canvas clearly indicated: how the students could find library resources, student services or other key needs, laid out the curriculum in a clear and concise way, and made deadlines and assignments plainly evident, the ease of use made learning easier.

These insights demonstrated that many students are feeling isolated socially and physically and feeling anxious, and may be ill-prepared for online learning. During this period, some students are challenged since they are not adequately equipped with the basic technological tools and skills, and may be watching poor quality pre-recorded or live online lecture videos in an unfamiliar environment with novice online instructors. What is worth mentioning is that a successful online learning experience is a result of the integration of several elements in the design and delivery of the experience. It is expected that many of these elements will be missing in emergency remote online teaching, which is more a contingency plan rather than ‘normal online learning’. It is thus understandable, that many students will be frustrated and dissatisfied with the emergency remote online learning experience.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative multiple-case study approach exploring the emergency remote online teaching experience of seven instructors from three higher education institutions which moved to remote online learning strategy to minimise disruption to the academic calendar caused by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. All the institutions are located in the capital City of the Maldives. Prior to the pandemic, all the three institutions had predominantly used in-person course delivery models with a few integrating learning management systems for assessment purposes and to deliver some content online. Furthermore, it is important to note that prior to COVID-19 forced transition to online teaching, online learning was just an emerging practice not widely implemented in higher education educational delivery in the Maldives. For this study, multiple case study-

approach was deemed important since this approach allowed for comparison of similar and contrasting strategies and practices employed in the transitioning to online teaching across and within the cases (instructors) and institutions (higher education institutions). According to Staker (1994), a case study is defined as an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units. Staker identified three types of case studies; Intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies. Staker (1994) defined collective case studies, also referred to as multiple-case studies, as studies in which a number of cases are studied jointly in order to understand a phenomenon, population or general condition. Thus, a difference between a single case study and a multiple case study is that in multiple case studies, the researchers study multiple cases to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Staker, 1995). In addition, this enables the researcher to analyse the data within each situation and also across different situations, unlike when a single case study is chosen. Moreover, evidence created from a multiple case study is also measured strong and reliable (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). The multiple case study method employed in this study is not aimed at analysing cases and making broad generalisations. It is used to define cases and to explore the practice and the setting the instructors have experienced in order to understand it better. Therefore, the aim of the case study is both illustrative in describing what the instructors have experienced, and also confirmative in highlighting the practices adopted during the experience in light of evidence derived from literature.

Selection of Participants

For the purpose of this research, as a first step, higher education institutions operated centrally from Male, the capital city of Maldives, that had adopted a remote online learning strategy to enable educational continuity, were identified. An institution that offered virtual courses was excluded from this study since the institution was already following the remote online teaching model prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Secondly, convenient purposive sampling (Koerber, and McMichael, 2008) was used to select cases that are personally known to the researcher, since the research was conducted within a limited time. In this regard, five instructors were identified and contacted. In addition, snowball sampling (Koerber, and McMichael, 2008) was used as a second sampling strategy in which the five instructors known to the researcher were asked to nominate other colleagues who were teaching online in their institutions who they thought would be willing to participate in the study. In selecting the participants, consideration was given to select information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon under exploration intensely and to allow for some level of variation in terms of teaching experience. Accordingly, some factors considered for selection were: varying degree of teaching experience, having online teaching background, and not having online teaching background. The target was to study a minimum of two instructors from each of the selected institutions (minimum 6 cases). The selected participants were contacted through phone and they were given a brief introduction to the aim and purpose of the study and how the information they provide will be used in the study. Informed consent from participation in the study was obtained

initially through phone and later by responding to a written statement in the semi-structured interview questionnaire shared online as a Google document. 8 instructors volunteered to participate in the study and 7 responded.

Data Collection

Initially, participants were informed of the study goals of this research and anticipated involvement through a phone conversation. The researcher followed all the requirements of the ethics compliance in human subjects' protection. From institution X, four instructors responded, from institution Y 2 instructors responded and 1 instructor from institution Z, responded. The data sources of the study consisted of (1) a semi-structured interview questionnaire shared online with the seven online instructors, and (2) an interview to confirm the data and to fill any information gaps evident in the first interview transcript. The semi structured interview questionnaire consisted of 19 questions. Section A was designed to collect general demographic information related to instructors' background, including: educational background, teaching experience, prior experience in teaching online and confidence in teaching and assessing online. The remaining questions were designed to collect data on: teaching techniques used in classes moved online, changes made to assessments, institutional support provided in the transitioning to online teaching and learning, assistance that instructors viewed as important in better ensuring the delivery of a quality educational experience to the students, adjustments made to the teaching styles with the shift to online, how students are coping with online learning, and recommendations for remote teaching.

Data was collected in April and in early May during semester one of 2020, right after the implementation of the emergency remote online teaching. The participants completed a semi-structured interview questionnaire shared online (as requested by a few of them) and they were given three days' time to respond in English, in writing to the interview questions. A few questions included precoded strategies derived from literature are relevant for that particular question. This was done to guide the response towards online learning and to get structured and relevant responses. When the completed transcript was received, the document content was analysed by the researcher and a second interview was conducted when deemed necessary. As such, the second interview was conducted on phone with four of the participants to clarify discrepancies and to confirm and complete the data required (Creswell 1994). It is important to note that the semi-structured interview questionnaire was designed to get open structured responses, not in-depth accounts of the experience due to the limited time available for this study.

Instructor profile

The 7 participants whose experience explored in this study are all females with an age range from 30 to 55 years of age and a varying number of years in teaching online and working in the tertiary education sector. They could well be characterized as having a diverse range of experience and level of expertise and confidence in online teaching, including a working knowledge of the technologies that are available to support learning, teaching and assessment online.

Table 1
Teaching And Assessment Online.

Participants	Age	Educational Background	Years of Teaching in Higher Education Teaching Experience	Previous online Teaching Experience	Institution
Case 1	38	Arts	5	YES	X
Case 2	30	Arts	4	YES	Y
Case 3	55	Education	20	YES	X
Case 4	38	Arts/ Education	12	YES	X
Case 5	31	Education	3	YES	X
Case 6	44	Health/ Education	7	YES	Z
Case 7	47	Arts/ Education	15	YES	Y

Data Analysis

The source of data for this research was the completed semi-structured interview transcript by each participant. In the first phase, the responses were analysed and coded under five broad categories that support the research questions set for this study; (1) teaching techniques used in remote online teaching, (2) support provided and expected by the institution, (3) challenges and concerns raised by the instructors while adjusting, (4) how students are coping with the forced shift to online learning, (5) recommendations for prospective online instructors in similar situations. Responses to the precoded aspects provided in the interview questionnaire were analysed and presented in a table and marked in terms of their presence in the cases studied. In the second stage of the analysis, individual-case analysis was carried out and manual thematic coding was done in order to allow the researcher to become familiar with each case as a whole and to generate a list of relevant themes appearing in the open accounts of each case. During the cross-case analysis, the researcher examined these themes in terms of their presence in or absence in the cases studied. This helped to identify common themes in their rhetoric and highlight the similarities and differences across the cases as well as across and within the institutions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Themes and categories that emerged from the data were augmented with literature.

Findings And Discussion

Findings

The ensuing description presents the findings and discussions based on the exploration of the experiences of the seven participants, research question and the objectives of the study. The main purpose of this study was to explore the instructors experience in transitioning to remote online teaching during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period. The experience was explored through a lens guided by the following five areas aligned to the research questions which guided the study; (1) teaching techniques used in remote online teaching, (2) support provided by the institution, (3) challenges and concerns raised by the instructors while adjusting, (4) how students are coping with the forced shift to online learning and (5) recommendations for prospective online instructors in similar situations. The findings of this study will be discussed under the aforementioned five areas.

1. Teaching techniques used in remote online teaching

To explore this aspect, participants were presented with precoded teaching strategies derived from literature (Lederman 2020a; Watermeyer, et al., 2020) and an open comments section to add additional strategies employed by the instructor. Analysis of the instructors' response to the question with the precoded aspects revealed evidence of using a wide range of techniques in the remote online teaching context (see Table 2). The top three strategies used by the instructors are: (1) distributing material via the institution's Learning Management System (LMS), (2) communicating with students via social media and (3) using synchronous video (Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc.). Interestingly, none of the participants have indicated using (4) asynchronous recorded video of lectures as a strategy for remote online teaching, which was reported as a popular strategy used in many universities considering the poor internet connections and access issues faced by students and instructors (Lederman, 2020a; Linney, 2020a; Linney, 2020b). Only a few participants reported using (5) pre-recorded videos from external sources (YouTube, etc.), (6) institutional conference/chat function, and only one indicated (7) assigning weekly online tasks. Teaching strategies adopted by the instructors in the remote online teaching context may be best described as a simple practical technology driven solution fit for the immediate needs of the emergency situation caused by COVID-19, rather than a robust online learning pedagogy driven solution. As highlighted by Lim (2019), online learning strategies exist and these seemed to be missing in this context, with more focus on technology rather than pedagogy. Therefore, this has to be considered when evaluating the experience of the instructors through a lens of 'online learning' (Hodges, et al., 2020).

Table 2
Remote Online Teaching Techniques Used By The Study Participants.

No	Teaching techniques used in remote online teaching	Case
1	Distribution of material via institution's Learning Management System	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6,7
2	Synchronous video (Zoom, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts, etc.)	1, 3, 4, 5, 6,7
3	Asynchronous recorded video of lectures	None
4	Pre-recorded videos from external sources (YouTube, etc. .)	3, 6
5	Institutional conference/chat function	2, 6, 7
6	Communicating via social media	1 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
7	weekly online tasks	7

Changes in Assessments and Exam Expectations

Many universities across the world made amendments to the Academic Regulations for assessments and advised the faculty to use revised assessment approaches. The research findings showed that this was applicable to the institutions studied in this study as well. Similar to the survey results reported by Bay View Analytics, (Lederman ,2020a), most of the participants' accounts revealed that changes were made to the assignments and expectations related to the students' workload (see Table 3). While all the participants confirmed reducing the student workload, three of the participants also reported lowering expectations about the quality of the amount of work students were required to do. Furthermore, similar to the practices reported by experts from the US (Lederman, 2020b), the instructors who participated in this study also highlighted allowing flexibility in due dates, and reduced expectation of student workload as strategy used to provide relief to students during the COVID-19 affected period.

Assessment of student work even in the in-person delivery model is a complex task and requires a thorough preparation and planning process. In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, many universities similar to the institutions in the Maldives, opted for alternative forms of assessment. The type of online assessments provided by many universities in this period will depend on the institution's capabilities to administer a reliable, valid and fair online assessment. For many universities this will be complex and a challenging task, since, despite the increased adoption of technology in teaching and learning, online assessment is an underdeveloped area in most of the traditional universities (Timmis et al., 2016). Thus, it is expected that the transition from in-person teaching to online delivery during this emergency remote online teaching, will have a serious impact on assessments and evaluation (Sahu, 2020). Moreover, for instructors, during this emergency remote teaching context, the learning curve in conducting effective quality online assessment will be too big a challenge to conquer within the limited time available along with other

impacting factors. Most of the instructors will be challenged with administering assessments online for courses designed for in-person learning. Challenges in the successful implementation of online exams can result from issues related to security, validity and fairness issues (Alruwais et al., 2019; Kearns 2012; Shraim, 2019; Watson and Sottile, 2010).

It is therefore, not startling to observe the change in expectations of assignments and quality of online assessments when the instructors had to change the assessment types to fit the emergency online model. Keeping this in mind, surprisingly, none of the three institutions implemented the policy of allowing students the option to choose pass/ fail as an alternative to the A-F grades for the affected semester. This was a policy change implemented in many universities across the world considering the challenges in delivering a robust quality ensured learning experience and assessment during the stressful COVID-19 impacted period. It is evident that many higher education institutions are yet to master the relative advantages of online assessment with regard to factors such as “pedagogy, validity, reliability, affective factors, practicality and security,” (Shraim, 2019). It is therefore understandable for instructors to change their expectations on the quality of student assessment in the remote online teaching context.

Table 3
Changes In Assessments And Exam Expectations

No	Changes in Assessments and Exam expectations	Case
1	I changed the kinds of assignments or exams I am asking students to do.	6,7 ,4 ,3 ,2 ,1
2	I lowered my expectations about the amount of work that my students will be able to do.	5,7 ,4 ,2 ,1
3	I (or my institution) allowed students the option to choose pass/ fail instead of A-F grades for this semester. None	
4	I dropped some assignments or exams	3
5	I lowered my expectations about the quality of work that my students will be able to do.	7 ,5 ,2
6	I dropped some of the readings that I was originally asking students to do.	7 ,6 ,4 ,3 ,2 ,1
7	Flexible deadlines given for weekly tasks.	7

2. Support provided to the instructors by the institution

As highlighted by the experience of some universities of Italy, US and, and Singapore, a systematic approach to support plays a major role in ensuring successful implementation of remote online teaching, especially when instructors are forced to move to online teaching abruptly within a short period of time (Lederman, 2020a; Lederman, 2020b; Lee, 2020; Linney, 2020a; Linyen, 2020b; Watermeyer, et al., 2020). When asked about assistance that is required, all the participants of this study reported the importance of (1) an online resource hub with links to information about how to quickly transition to online learning, as the most critical. Other forms of support identified as important are: (2) information on how best to support remote students, (3) greater access to online digital materials, (4) advice on how to adhere to accessibility requirements when moving online, (5) Webinar for students on how to succeed in online classes, and (6) assistance with technology to support online education. When inquired about the helpful support provided by their respective institution during the online remote learning experience, participants from institutions X reported two types of support: (1) crash course in using Zoom, and (2) having access, at all times, to a technical assistant who provided technical support. Case 6, from institution Z experienced similar type of support, but also highlighted that in addition, policies and guidelines were given to orient and guide the instructors. It is interesting to find that the two participants (Case 2 and Case 7) from institution Y presented two very contrasting perspectives on how the institution supported their remote online teaching experience. While Case 2, declared getting “no guidance at all” from the institution, Case 7 produced a list of a wide variety of supportive measures developed and ensured by the institution. She stated the following in this regard:

PD sessions were held. Module delivery and assessment methods were decided in discussion with lecturers. Support was provided on setting up Moodle tasks and online support provided during the class. Online feedback is taken from students to assure quality and identify difficulties. All live lessons are recorded for observations. Proper feedback channels were set and Coordinators monitor the amount and quality of tasks.

These two contradictory views on the approach used by institution Y is an interesting finding of this study. The contradiction might have resulted from an inconsistent decentralised approach employed by the institution. In addition, this also highlights the importance of adopting a consistent approach similar to the Singapore approach (Lim, 2020) in providing support to the staff when implementing innovative practical solutions that impact all the instructors and students. This is especially critical in a difficult and challenging situation like the COVID-19 crisis impacted period. This is an area that needs to be addressed in all the higher education institutions before the next disaster or pandemic hits and causes another abrupt shift from classroom to cloud.

Table 3:

Assistance Needed To Deliver A Quality Online Educational Experience To The Students

No	Assistance Provide by the Institution	Case
1	Information on how best to support remote students	1, 3, 4, 6
2	Greater access to online digital materials	1,2, 3, 4, 5
3	Advice on how to adhere to accessibility requirements when moving online	1, 3,
4	Webinar for students on how to succeed in online classes	1, 3, 4, 7
5	An online resource hub with links to information about how to quickly transition to online learning	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7
6	Assistance with technology to support online education	1, 2 3, 4, 7

3. Concerns and challenges faced during the transition

When asked to highlight the main challenges faced during the remote online teaching experience from the precoded choices provided (see Table 4), the instructors identified all as challenges with most choosing: (1) not having enough time to get used to it, (4) difficulty in ensuring student engagement and learning, (3) not having adequate training on the tools as the biggest challenges. Only three participants chose (2) modifying lesson plans for remote teaching as a challenge, while only one of the participants identified (5) not having the tools needed as a challenge.

Table 4

Challenges and Concerns Faced by the Participants

No	Challenges	Case
1	Not enough time to get used to it	6 ,5 , 3 , 2 , 1
2	My lesson plans need to be modified for remote teaching	7 ,4 , 2
3	I have not had adequate training on the tools	6 ,5 ,3 ,2 ,1
4	It is more difficult to ensure that students are engaged and learning	7 ,6 , 3 ,2 ,1
5	I don't have the tools that I need	2

Although each instructor had a unique remote online teaching context, the analysis of the open accounts provided by the instructors revealed a common thread of concerns and challenges associated with the experience. These will be broadly summarised under the following: (a) uncertainty around student engagement in the online environment, (b) challenges related to instructor and student readiness

for online learning, and (c) challenges caused by the influence of the predominant traditional pedagogy and teaching philosophy.

(a) Uncertainty around student engagement in the online environment,

Student engagement and commitment in learning activities is important in online learning because it can increase learning and reduce online course dropout (Finn and Zimmer, 2012; Lee, Pate, and Cozart, 2015). Student engagement was revealed to be a major concern raised by six participants of this study. For example, expressing her concerns, Case 1, stated:

I mean to say most of the online lessons are more teacher centered... so have to think of ways to make it more student centered so that they benefit with online lessons as much as that of a face to face class.

Similarly, Cases 6, 5, 3, and 7 also highlighted disengaged students as a concern. For example, case 5 expressed the uncertainty and the inability to judge the students' performance and the quality of knowledge gained as a main challenge while teaching through this mode. Contrastingly, Case 4, who is proficient and experienced in teaching online, with 12 years of experience in teaching in higher education, stressed that her main concern was possibly overwhelming students who are already in a stressful situation. She reported employing a wide variety of tools to engage the students during the synchronous sessions as an effective approach. She described her approach;

Basically, I take a live lecture via Zoom while sharing a PPT via screen share, and have students answer concept checks on the Google doc. I created a Google drive folder for the module with a Google doc for each online live session. I included a concept check slide after every 2 or 3 slides, try not to talk for more than 10 mins at a stretch. I ask students to keep their mics off but to let me know if they are following me with occasional thumbs ups or smileys or just a yes on the chat. I do pause between points to also ask if they were following me alright.

Case 4 employed several strategies highlighted by Zayapragassaraza (2020) identified as effective in increasing and ensuring higher levels of student engagement in online teaching. In his paper he has proposed smart teaching, using smart tools, making students as creators of learning resources, using students' e-learning circles, conducting online discussion forums and using MOOCs as successful student engagement strategies.

Student engagement has been described as a challenge even in the international context as well. For example, Lee (2020) described the concern of an academic colleague in Hong Kong to demonstrate the challenges faced by instructors in similar situations like the participants of this study.

In the first week, I got around 50% attendance, which was not bad at all. However, things got worse, and last week, I got one student attending the class, which was frustrating.

Surprisingly, Shenoy et al., (2020) have reported an unusual experience during this remote online teaching period. They have reported that student attendance was “20 times better than regular class sessions and it was almost 100 percent attendance while engaging them virtually.” This stands in contrast to numerous studies which suggested that it is harder to engage, in terms of retention, distant students, than face-to-face courses (Yang et al., 2013). Student disengagement can be caused by many factors. It is therefore important to consider these impacting factors and integrate strategies in the online course design to foster student engagement (Chen et al., 2018; Chickering and Gamson 1999). The seven strategies effective online instructors use to engage students, according to Chickering and Gamson (1999) are: encourage contacts between students and faculty, develop reciprocity and cooperation among students, use active learning techniques, give prompt feedback, emphasize time on task, communicate high expectations, respect diverse talents and ways of learning. Lee (2020) has argued that despite the availability of the many such useful online teaching strategies, expecting novice online teachers to scour and to apply them may seem rather unrealistic in the emergency online teaching period.

b) Challenges related to instructor and student readiness for online learning

Student and instructor readiness are variables important for successful online learning. With regard to students, the participants of this research highlighted students’ lack of commitment to study, being mentally unprepared for online learning, poor self-regulation skills and coming to class unprepared as the main challenges and concerns. For example, Case 2, expressed her concerns and highlighted:

The mental status of the students is not as good as before, hence their level of work and commitment has differed. Also the quality of work being sent in has significantly reduced. Therefore, as the situation does not seem to improve, there is fear that students’ quality and rate of work will be greatly impacted.

Case 1 also indicated students’ lack of commitment as a challenge, and in addition, she observed students’ inability to self-regulate in the online learning context. Describing student attendance to the mandatory synchronous sessions, she said;

My concern is.... there are the bunch of students who might be in class at the beginning and make excuses if caught not being in class... students were unable to be online on time and some even forgot.

Case 3 described the number of students coming unprepared for the synchronous sessions despite having provided guidance for preparation through LMS many days prior to the scheduled sessions as disconcerting. Similarly, Case 7 reported that many students “do their bare minimum and for a Masters course, their commitment is not up to the required standard”

With regards to instructors, the big learning curve associated with new technology and poor internet connection have been reported as challenges which

contributed to the frustration experienced by both students and instructors. For Case 3, with almost 20 years of teaching experience in higher education, unfamiliarity with some of the features of technology was the main challenge in delivering a more engaging session to students. Case 3 also reported experiencing the technology learning curve while describing her confidence and readiness to teach online:

I do agree to some extent... i mean it is similar to that of taking a face to face class... the preparation is almost the same... we need to plan ahead. Have things thought through for what might happen just as a normal class. And the reason I am saying I agree to some extent is that I am not a very technology friendly person... anyway with time, I am learning to use the online teaching apps to the maximum.

The accounts related student readiness evidence the lack of learner autonomy in the context studied. Learner autonomy is an important characteristic required for successful online learning. As emphasized by Holec (1981, p.3) autonomous learners have “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. It enables students to be engaged in an independent and self-regulated learning process in which “they take initiatives, monitor progress, and evaluate individual learning outcomes” (Benson, 2013). This missing element may lead to the attainment of poor learning outcomes. Therefore, to promote effective learning, and to increase student retention, it is important to develop the students as independent and self-regulated learners. Lee et al., (2015), proposed autonomy support as a key strategy to enhance online students’ intrinsic motivation and engagement. In addition, the study has revealed that the move from on-campus to online teaching has not been a smooth transition for instructors as well. This is not surprising since the shift involves a huge pedagogy and technology learning curve. Even for many in the developed world this was a challenge (Mukherjee, 2020). What is required for a smooth transition is a robust technology education strategy targeting skill and knowledge development of both students and instructors.

(c) Challenges caused by the influence of the predominant traditional pedagogy and teaching philosophy

Teaching philosophy plays a major role in how education is structured and delivered. One of the main findings of the study is the evidence of the influence of traditional pedagogy and presumed in-person teaching philosophy on conducting online teaching. Many participants have demonstrated an inclination to judge the remote online teaching experience informed by the traditional lens. A persisting conclusion or belief evident across most of the cases was that student centred teaching strategy cannot be effectively delivered through online teaching, and in-person classes are comparatively more interactive than online teaching. This was reflected in the accounts of Case 6 ,5 ,2 ,1 and 7. For example, Case 1 described her teaching “experience :”

..... trying to make the lessons more interactive... I mean to say most of the online lessons are more teacher centered... so have to think of ways to make it more student centered so that they benefit with online lessons as much as that of a face to face class

Similarly, Case 2 expressed her belief regarding online teaching:

...teaching is not as effective as before, since student centred instruction methodologies cannot be implemented effectively online.

Likewise, Case 6 described that “online mode of delivery” is insufficient in meeting the needs of students who have been studying within the in-person ‘regular’ delivery mode. She highlighted:

For the students who were attending regular classes this source might not be most helpful as we get to teach them face to face and it helped us and them to have more interacting classes but for the students with flexible mode this will be more convenient and more fruitful than sitting for a long time in class.

This is an interesting view considering both groups, regular and block mode students, attend in-person classes. The view that implementing interactivity is challenging in online learning and in the flexible (block) mode is a point which needs to be debated, since many institutions in the Maldives offer block mode courses in which students are expected to sit through in-person sessions for an extended period of time.

In the same way, Case 7 has the belief that collaboration is challenging in the online class. She reported:

My lessons are usually activity based with students collaboratively doing tasks, presentations, discussions and debates. Now it’s mostly discussions as they cannot collaborate during class time on any of the tasks. The current style is discussion points and lectures, followed up with tasks.

The biggest concern for Case 5 is experiencing the feeling of being disconnected with students. She explained, the way of teaching is very much different, the connection between the teacher and the students is lacking.”

What case 5 is experiencing can be best described through what Moore (1993) identified as transactional distance. This statement reveals the criticality of having awareness of the transactional distance and knowledge of the different strategies used to minimise it. Not having this knowledge can in fact leave a novice online instructor feeling disconnected, frustrated and dissatisfied with the online teaching experience as evidenced by concerns expressed by Case 5.

Case 3 with almost 20 years of teaching experience in the higher education sector reflected and described herself as a novice online teacher, who is beginning to adopt online teaching. However, she continues to harbour a lingering doubt about the effectiveness of the online delivery mode, in comparison to in-person delivery mode. In addition, she expressed her growing awareness of a need to unlearn some of her old beliefs. Consequently, she believed that she needs to get trained to teach online “without being made to feel stupid” for being new to online mode of teaching.

These accounts are interesting revelations. Mainly, they capture the struggles faced by instructors who are trying to teach online while being highly influenced by the dominant traditional pedagogy and teaching philosophy, and with minimum training in teaching in the virtual environment. As aforementioned, two things are evident from their accounts: (1) the existing belief that in-person classes are more interactive and students-centred while online classes are more teacher-centred

and non-interactive (2) an existing knowledge gap in relation to online learning strategies. Many of these perceptions are similar to the views expressed by many respondents who participated in the surveys conducted by Watermeyer, et al., (2020) and Lederman (2020a). Formation of these perceptions and impressions may have been influenced by the predominant in-person teaching philosophy developed through existing teacher training programs and dominant traditional academic culture. The evidence also implies that online teaching requires new competencies and a new skill set different from what is required within the traditional in-person education delivery model. As Palloff and Pratt (2013) stated, "successful learners in the online environment need to be active, creative, and engaged in the learning process." This can be achieved when instructors are prepared for this challenging role. The thorny question that arises from this is: does online education need a special pedagogy? Serdyukov (2015) raised this question and after analysis of several existing pedagogical models, proposed an e-pedagogy model citing several arguments to support why an alternative strategy is needed.

4. How are the students coping?

This question was intended to capture an overall perception on the student experience of the remote online teaching period. When asked about how the students were coping during this period, the participants presented two different perspectives. The overall perception is that many students were adjusting to the new learning environment despite facing several obstacles. The main issues highlighted by the participants of this study, with regards to students' experience, included: lack of, or poor internet access, commitment from the students and unsuitable home environments. Case 1, for example, said, "students did pretty well except that they were unable to be online on time and some even forgot." In addition, poor internet connection (Case 1, Case 2, Case 5 and Case 6) and "having to pay huge amounts of money to service providers for their connections," (Case 2) were identified as obstacles students faced during this period. Another negatively affecting variable reported is the unsuitable home environment. For many students, mostly female, managing study and home during the COVID-19 experience was a burdensome endeavour (Case 3). Case 3 reported employing a more flexible and compassionate approach in delivering learning considering this state of students during the COVID-19 crisis. This involved reducing the number of tasks students were required to do online and changing some assessment tasks. She described her students:

Most of my students are mature female adult students. Most of them are very stressed. Some of their husbands and relatives are working in the field, some of the relatives are stuck in other islands and so many other things are keeping them worried, so considering this, I had reduced some online activities they had to do, and was also more flexible with deadlines. But I didn't compromise the quality of the assessments or work they did.

On the positive side, some students, according to case 4, are ready to embrace this format of learning and they are managing well. As reported by Case 4 during interview 2, students enrolled in in-person block delivery mode and are forced to sit in classes for an extended period of time during the block sessions found the remote online learning mode to be more effective and beneficial.

5. Recommendations for prospective online instructors in similar situations

The instructors studied for this research have highlighted several actions, according to them, can minimize factors that cause interference with quality online teaching. Three main recommendations emerged from their open accounts. They are: (1) become familiar with technology, (2) change in attitude and (3) effective planning and preparation. Case 2 suggested:

Expose yourself to the latest technologies, and equip with necessary equipment. Also, lots of practice makes you better, but not perfect.

Another important suggestion made is to be prepared to troubleshoot technical issues related to technology integrated learning, because according to case 3:

You might yourself have to have most of your time spent on attending to technical issues such as students getting disconnected, or not having access or poor connection.

Being patient and a change in attitude is what Case 4 recommended as an important aspect when transitioning to online teaching. She suggested:

Please be patient with yourself, think about all the training you have experienced in your long career both as a student and as a teacher; this is another learning curve, an opportunity to discover new strengths, a chance to explore your creativity. Easy to get frustrated when we can't get the handle of something seemingly so simple, as adults, as academics this could be quite frustrating, easy to just dismiss and scrap the whole thing, bin it, but please just do it one more time! A colleague had expressed once, "this screen sharing is nothing short of magic"!

Case 7 recommended preparation and planning as an important factor needed for online teaching. She proposed: "take time to prepare well for the lessons and seek ways to maximise student engagement. "This is similar to what Tom Beaudoin, associate professor of religion, Fordham University has stated: "crucial academic labor matters... Imagine the total learning experience from the perspective of the online student and put your all into preparation on the front end," (Dimeo, 2017).

It is observed that the proposed recommendations are more technocentric than pedagogy focused. This according to Nickols (2011), is very common in higher education and e-learning discussions. In addition, the recommendations proposed by the participants of this study align well with recommendations made by experienced online educators (Dunlap, and Lowenthal (2018). Some interesting recommendations for first time online instructors made by another expert group included: be present and engage with the students in frequent dialogue, interact with students and providing a more enriched platform for students, employ sound pedagogy, organize local meet-ups, seek help from peer teaching review sessions engaging students often and early, build connected, caring communities for online students; be a learner, and most importantly get the proper training to teach online Dimeo (2017). It can be concluded that successful online learning is dependent on

how effectively instructors adopt effective pedagogical and technological strategies during the transition to online teaching.

Recommendations

This research study listened to the voice of seven remote online teachers in order to capture their experience and impressions related to teaching remotely online as a result of the COVID-19 forced shift to online teaching. The study has helped understand the different forces that can influence instructors' online teaching experience. In addition, the study has enabled the researcher to identify the common concerns and challenges and also barriers and affordance associated with the remote online teaching experience of the instructors. The main lesson learnt from this exploratory case study is, if online learning has to be a permanent feature of quality higher education delivery, it is critical to focus on both technological and pedagogy of online teaching and to enhance instructor and student readiness for teaching and learning in the online environment.

As evidenced by the findings of this study, it can be argued that online teaching is different from teaching in the traditional setting. This is reflected in the accounts of the participants of this study who, except Case 4, who is a proficient in online teaching and course design, are trained for traditional pedagogy. Many found conquering the learning curve and fitting into the different roles within the online learning context not only challenging but mentally exhausting as well. This demonstrated the inadequacy of the traditional pedagogical model in meeting the challenges posed by the online teaching environment. As argued by Marshall (2015), teaching online requires different skills and presents a fundamental challenge to teacher identity. Baran, Correia, and Thompson (2011) also emphasized that the competencies of online teachers are different from traditional classroom-based teachers. Therefore, it can be argued that there is a strong need to revisit, re-examine and reconstruct the traditional academic identity or persona (Marshall et al., 2017).

The idea of the online teacher persona is an emerging new concept in online teaching literature. In the context of online education, persona is used to define the roles that a teacher takes in an online environment (Baran Correia, 2014). Some researchers have described it as the cumulative affective, cognitive, and managerial roles that online teachers perform (Coppola et al., 2002, cited in Baran Correia, 2014). From this perspective, the online teacher persona appears to be fluid and dynamic, as teachers constantly revisit their assumptions regarding learning and teaching within an ever-changing educational setting. Consequently, when moving forward with online teaching, the first necessary step is to start with a clear acknowledgement that an online teacher persona differs significantly from the traditional academic persona.

Online learning environment is a constantly evolving dynamic environment, and it requires instructors to have distinct characteristics. Research on exemplary university teachers revealed, exemplary online teachers while holding on to presumed assumptions about how students learn in traditional classrooms revisit these assumptions and beliefs for the conditions of online teaching environments and change their practice accordingly (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). In addition, they demonstrate a high level of expertise in reflecting on their practice

and reacting to the uniqueness of their teaching contexts. They also reportedly have a more extensive, complex, and flexible repertoire of concepts of teaching effectiveness, a more developed concept of self-efficacy. Moreover, they use a wider range of criteria for self-evaluation, and draw upon almost twice as many strategies for enhancing student learning (Hativa, Barak, and Simhi, 2001, p. 700, cited in Baran, Correia, and Thompson, (2013).

How instructors transfer their thinking, pedagogical knowledge, and beliefs regarding online teaching to successful teaching practices that occur in online learning environments results from effective professional development. The change from traditional pedagogy to online pedagogy and taking the online teacher persona will inevitably have implications on how teacher training and professional development programs are designed and conducted. The instructors' experience and perceptions of online teaching revealed in this study demonstrated an existing strong need to refocus on training, and to develop a new teaching philosophy and identity fit for the online teacher. According to Baran et al. (2013), while transitioning from in-person to online teaching, instructors experience a number of changes in pedagogies and this requires a different approach to professional development for the purpose of online teaching. They highlighted four critical changes experienced by instructors as they go through a pedagogical transformation while teaching online. These changes are: (1) increasing structure and planning in the course design, (2) increasing organization in the course management, (3) increasing teacher presence for monitoring student learning, and (4) reconstructing teacher-student relationships. The impact of the challenges associated with these changes can be minimised through establishing strong support mechanisms at different stages of the transition (Serdyukov, 2015).

The findings of this study indicated that one of the factors that the instructors viewed as critical for successful implementation of online learning in their context were the various support mechanisms within the context that encouraged and sustained their successful online teaching practices. If online learning has to be effective the existing support systems of the institutions and how instructors harness the variable support has to be enhanced. This is important because as highlighted by Baran et al. (2013), whether online instructors create successful online teaching practices is dependent on how they harness personal, professional, contextual, and organizational factors regarding teaching online. If institutions make online learning a permanent delivery mode, these aspects have to be considered. There is also a need to recognize successful online teaching in higher education as an outcome of the interaction of support activities at teaching, community, and organization levels (Baran and Correia, 2014). What is revealing from the findings of this study is instructors struggle in fitting into new emerging roles as they transition from face-to-face to online teaching. Many seems to be struggling to replicate the in-person teaching experience in the online learning environment.

Analysis of support provided by the institutions during the remote online teaching was predominantly based on technology orientation. This is not surprising considering online education is often classified by the technologies used, not pedagogy (Anderson and Dron, 2011). The notion that technology-based education is led by technology, which is basically just an instructional tool, is a dominant view, even exhibited by the majority of the participants of this study. Consequently, this view is problematic since it can lead to instructors and institutions adopting

technology to traditional in-person teaching models instead of designing new pedagogy or transforming the conventional pedagogy to integrate the educational capabilities of new technologies (Serdyukov, 2015). This according to the aforementioned author often resulted in “ineffective classroom applications and/or superficial renovation of traditional educational practices that did not produce significant gains in the learning” (p. 2). Therefore, professional development of instructors in new technology-based education should not be concentrated only on operating continuously evolving technological tools. It should be combined with valuable pedagogical theoretical underpinnings or evidenced based practices to ensure a sound combination of digital technologies and pedagogies. In the current remote online teaching context, technology is driving the learning while online pedagogy is lagging behind. The persisting view that technology can “fix” all the problems instructors encounter in the online environment can be a disquieting view. As stated by Serdyukov (2015), Technocentrism is only effective when integrated within pedagogy.

Conclusions

The study was an exploratory, illustrative and contextual qualitative study. The researcher adopted a multiple case study approach to achieve the main objectives of the study. A semi-structured qualitative interview was conducted with seven instructors from three higher education institutions located in the Capital city of Maldives, that adopted remote online teaching as a strategy to minimise disruption to the academic calendar. The participants were purposely selected. The interview questionnaire was shared online and the participants provided written accounts in English. The completed written transcripts were analysed and a second interview was conducted with five of the participants to clarify discrepancies and to confirm and complete the data required. Manual thematic coding was applied to the unstructured responses and common themes/strategies relevant to the research questions were identified and grouped, and similar and contrasting practices and strategies employed by the participants were identified.

This study has helped to gain a better understanding of the remote online teaching experience of the instructors in the Maldivian context by revealing the impact of the presumed traditional teaching philosophies and attitude towards online learning. In addition, findings have identified the teaching strategies used, the support provided by the institution, the challenges and concerns instructors have faced during the online teaching experience. Exploring the experience of instructors from different institutions also allowed for cross analysis of the instructors' experience across and within the different cases and the institution and has enabled the researcher to examine the online teaching approaches, and strategies employed by the instructors within a limited time available for online transition. The findings of this study indicated that many still continue to hold firmly on to their earlier assumptions and beliefs about how students learn in traditional classrooms, and have tried to replicate the same in the online context. This was found to be problematic and the root cause of the many challenges faced by the instructors. The change from traditional pedagogy to online pedagogy will have implications on how the academic persona is defined and developed through professional development programs.

Considering the strong influence of traditional pedagogy and teaching philosophy on online teaching, it is important to prepare and support instructors for online teaching so that they know what to expect and how to develop their online teacher persona through online pedagogies and develop positive attitudes toward teaching with online technologies. The quality of online delivery is strongly correlated with how the professional development approaches respond to the needs of online teachers. These approaches are critical in helping online teachers adopt online pedagogical practices and reconstruct their teacher persona in an online environment. Higher education institutions need to address the existing professional development gaps with more focus on empowerment of online teachers, promoting critical reflection, and integrating technology into pedagogical inquiry (Baran et al., 2011). If online teaching is to be a permanent feature of higher education delivery in the Maldives, institutions need to bring in educational technology experts such as instructional designers to achieve the desirable pedagogical goals.

As many higher education institutions in the Maldives grapple with the relatively new experience of teaching online, it is important to learn from the best practices applicable for remote online teaching or online teaching in the normal context. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, it is likely that online teaching might become a mainstream mode of instruction due to the perceived ease and usefulness and convenience (Serdyukov, 2015) of online education largely influenced by the first online teaching experience (Lee 2020). There is a fear that the remote online education model, which is being rapidly implemented at the expense of quality, being adopted as normal online learning, or will be rejected based on the poor impression gained from the poorly designed experience. Both of these scenarios can have a detrimental impact on the progress of higher education delivery: one can lead to enthusiasts adopting a low-quality online learning model for convenience and cost cutting purposes, while the other leads to, the sceptics, resisting any form of online and hence, rejecting technology driven advancement in higher education delivery. Maybe it is time for a teacher training makeover.

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