



## Article

# Exploring Learning for On-Campus Students Transitioning to Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perceptions of Students in the Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Due to the emergence of COVID-19, the education sector has embraced online learning as the main delivery method to engage and impact knowledge and skills acquisition of their students. However, learning is not just about knowledge and skills acquisition but is an activity contributing to change and enrichment of the learner. This paper draws upon the results of a qualitative interview conducted amongst postgraduate students enrolled in an AMBA-accredited and top business school in the UK. The results revealed that students' experience of the sudden transition to online learning is shaped by four distinct but interrelated areas: benefits of online learning, challenges of online learning, success factors in online learning and support in online learning. These findings will help higher education institutions and online learning tutors concentrate more on areas important to student learning when migrating from face-to-face to online modes of teaching.

**Keywords:** online learning; COVID-19; face-to-face learning; student transition; higher education



**Citation:** Osobajo, O.A.; Oke, A. Exploring Learning for On-Campus Students Transitioning to Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perceptions of Students in the Higher Education. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 807. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12110807>

Academic Editor: Han Reichgelt

Received: 24 September 2022

Accepted: 11 November 2022

Published: 12 November 2022

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## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the second quarter of 2020, online learning has been a norm in facilitating teaching and learning due to the emergence of COVID-19. The education sector, of which the higher institution community is a key player, embraced the online medium as the main delivery method to engage and impart knowledge [1]. On-campus students who under normal circumstances engage face-to-face with tutors and colleagues were doing so virtually. This sudden transition to an online mode of teaching and learning was imperative to comply with the government policy on physical and social distancing, thereby mitigating the spread of the virus. Although online learning is not new, the term, including its facilitating platforms, is now the lingua franca in the education sector. However, the idea has been used interchangeably with other terms such as distance learning, internet learning, e-learning, networked learning, virtual learning, Web-based learning and computer-assisted learning [2]. While these terms share the same motivational roots, “online learning” is adopted in this study to explain the process by which students engage with teaching and learning through a technology-enabled environment with physical and virtual components.

Online learning is a means through which students are provided learning materials via the computer. Likewise, Khan [3] referred to online learning as an innovative means of providing remote audiences with instructions using the Web. Online learning has been argued to occur when learners access learning instructions, complete learning activities and achieve learning objectives and outcomes via the Web [4]. Cojocariu et al. [5] referred to online learning as a learning process involving a computer connected to a network that offers students the opportunity to learn anytime, anywhere, with various means and diverse in any rhythm. This aligns with Clark and Mayer's [6] definition of online learning as delivering instruction via a digital device to support learning. Likewise, online learning is perceived as a learning experience through the internet computers in a synchronous classroom where students interact with other students and tutors without being dependent

on their physical location to participate in this online learning experience [7]. This definition is consistent with Dhawan [8] of online learning as a learning experience which could occur in asynchronous or synchronous environments using different electronic devices such as computers, laptops and mobile phones. Online learning can be summarised as follows:

1. Learners are in a different location to the instructor or tutor.
2. The use of technology such as a computer is compulsory for interaction between the tutor and learners, accessing learning materials and responding to given activities.
3. Tutoring or teaching can be done from anywhere or at any time.

However, Oke and Fernandes [9] argued that online learning with the use of technology lends itself to a didactic teaching and learning approach, undermining learners' ability to engage in active learning. This argument supports Palmer, O'Kane and Owens' [10] views that learners often find it difficult to align with changes, which shape, alter or accentuate how they make meaning of their learning. Hence, true learning arises from individual experience [11] through active engagement and participation in the learning process. Gale and Parker [12] referred to transition as a change students navigate through and within formal education. At the same time, Taylor and Harris-Evans [13] stated that transition is a period of adjustment involving pathways of inculcation.

However, the sudden transition to an online mode of teaching and learning can be challenging for learners and tutors, considering that the transition requires learners to adapt to a new learning style, situation or environment which is dissimilar to what they are used to. According to Murphy [14], online learning displaced the class experience in face-to-face learning with a secure online learning format. This is consistent with the argument that the sudden transition represents a significant paradigm shift in teaching and learning and is thus termed a 'black swan' [1].

While the COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to combine face-to-face learning and online teaching in a collaborative and blended manner, Oke and Fernandes [9] asserted that learners and tutors can benefit from online teaching by moving beyond the "paper and glass" approach, where documents are only uploaded for students to access at their own pace and convenience. However, the authors argued that online teaching should mimic the classroom environment where learners and tutors interact collaboratively through interactive and engaging technology. Technology plays an important role in the working pattern, interaction and student experience in online learning. It provides students access to countless online resources and aids them in learning. Singh and Thurman [7] noted that technology is fundamental to online learning in that it is instrumental in delivering content and enhancing students' experience and interactions between tutors and their students. Technology encourages students learning experience via independent learning and research to improve their knowledge and understanding. Thus, Dhawan [8] concluded that technology provides resilient and innovative solutions that foster easy engagement and communication in online learning. With technology, students can simplify instructional learning content, making concepts more digestible and enhancing their experiences. This is because similar to the on-campus mode of learning, a student's experience has a significant influence on the level of their engagement in online learning. This is consistent with constructivism [15] and reflects Anderson's [2] argument that online learning allows learners to construct meaning and develop from the learning experience.

The constructivist learning theory, rooted in the work of authors such as Piaget [15] and Vygotsky [16], is informed by scientific study and observation about how people learn. The theory asserts that learners construct their knowledge and understanding through experience while reflecting on those experiences [17]. This view suggests that students play an active role in their learning process and how they acquire knowledge and skills. Driscoll [18] argued further that the philosophical stance behind the constructivist learning theory supports learners' logical and conceptual growth through experience. The author added that constructivist learning theory is based on the premise that knowledge and skills only exist within the human mind and may not necessarily match the real-world scenario.

The constructivist learning theory aids students in selecting and transforming information from past and current experience and their knowledge into new personal understanding [19,20]. Learners' experience and active involvement in learning are fundamental to the constructivist learning theory. While learners' experience is central when constructing meanings, their ability to tap into their experience through critical thinking is required throughout the entire learning process.

While the use of technology in facilitating teaching and learning is well documented [9] and students' transition into higher education is well researched [12,13,21], there is insufficient knowledge about the students' experience and wellbeing when engaging in online teaching and learning. Moreover, the current knowledge about the effects of a sudden transition of teaching and learning from face-to-face to online teaching formats is inadequate. This is because limited research has been done on the sudden shift of students from on-campus to online learning, particularly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic [22,23]. To fill this gap, this paper aims to explore and evaluate the learning experience of on-campus face-to-face students whose learning was suddenly moved online due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The rationale was to understand students' challenges and coping strategies while informing academic practice during mobility restrictions arising from uncertain situations such as COVID-19. Thus, this research seeks to answer the question, what is the learning experience of on-campus face-to-face students whose learning was suddenly moved online?

## 2. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive paradigm [24] to explore students' perceptions as they encounter the new reality of teaching and learning due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach was considered appropriate for this study due to the domain/context-specific uniqueness and peculiarity of teaching and learning disruptions. This allowed for the interpretations of students' diverse views and experiences [24,25] as they transition from the traditional face-to-face teaching approach to online learning. To explore this social phenomenon, an AMBA-accredited and top business school in the UK provided a unique context for data collection. Participants (Table 1) were purposively [25] recruited, from postgraduate courses in the business school, based on their relevance to the research problems and purpose.

**Table 1.** Participants demographics.

Characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	14	47%
	Female	16	53%
Age	20 to 25	15	50%
	26 to 30	8	27%
	31 to 35	4	13%
	36 to 40	2	7%
	41 to 45	1	3%
Course/programme	Project Management	14	47%
	Human Resource Management	6	20%
	Business and Management with HR	5	17%
	Procurement & Supply Chain Mgt	3	10%
	Oil and Gas Accounting and Finance	1	3%
	Energy Management	1	3%

A generic email introducing the study purpose was sent to the full-time postgraduate students who were enrolled as face-to-face classroom learners before the emergence of COVID-19 but had to suddenly migrate to online learning due to the pandemic. Data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intention was to allow the students to express their voluntary willingness to participate in the study without any

form of pressure or obligation to involve in the data collection process. Students who showed interest in the study were sent the participant information sheet. This was for the participants to understand how the data would be processed, their right to withdraw their participation at any stage and to secure a voluntary agreement before the interview.

### 2.1. Data Collection

Following the introduction of the lockdown rules across the UK, full-time face-to-face students were migrated to an online platform without the opportunity for the university to assess the students' technical and environmental needs that may affect their learning. To address this gap and to enhance students' learning experience during and post lockdown, the data for this study was collected from 2019/2020 cohort of 30 students using structured interviews. This number accounted for all the students who initially expressed their willingness to participate in the study and were sent the structured interview questions by email for completion. The data collection was conducted at the end of the second semester between July and August 2020, before starting a new academic session.

This allowed the participants to reflect on their experience of transitioning to online learning compared to the traditional face-to-face teaching method based on their interaction with and learning experiences of both online and face-to-face teaching methods. The interview questions addressed specific areas that may affect the students' engagement with online teaching, allowing them to interpret the complexity of a sudden transition based on their personal experience as they interact with online teaching and learning. Using structured questions, the interview focused on students' technical capability [26,27], environmental attributes [28], learning styles/skills [29] and personal characteristics [30].

### 2.2. Data Analysis

Consistent with a qualitative interpretive paradigm, a thematic analysis [24] was considered desirable for this study to gain a holistic understanding of students' perceptions regarding online learning. At first, the authors familiarised themselves with the data collected. This was imperative to identify preliminary concepts [31] and to ensure consistency. Data analysis was initially conducted on an individual basis, and we subsequently developed the study findings through processes of debriefing [32]. Through open coding and continuous comparative analysis, the study findings were repeatedly checked by the authors against preliminary concepts for similarities and refining [33]. The approach adopted in this study preserved the true meaning of students' experiences by interpreting and making sense of their views regarding the new reality of teaching and learning. Although structured questions were used for the interview process, the coding protocol and framework were established inductively using the early responses.

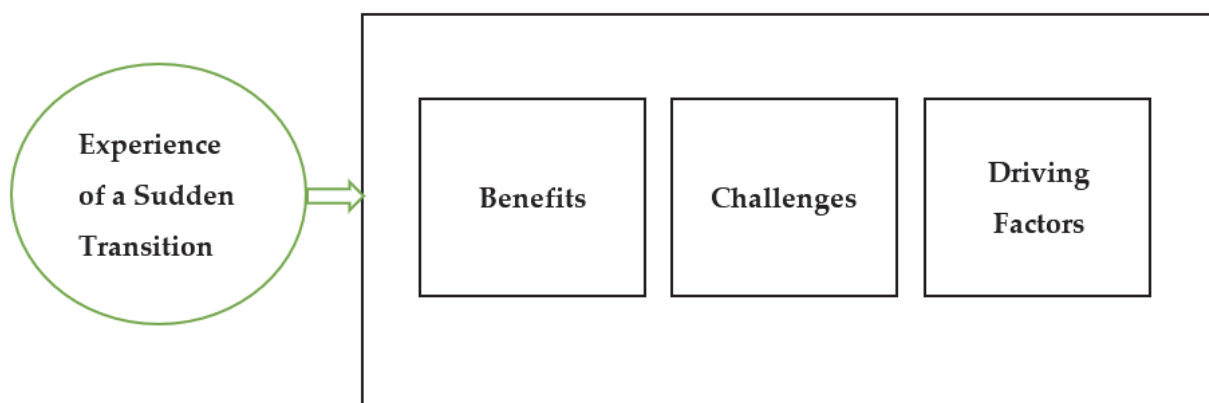
## 3. Findings

It should be noted that this study was designed to explore and evaluate students' learning experiences due to the emergence of COVID-19, which shaped the decisions to suddenly migrate the teaching and learning process to online platforms. The findings of this study that encapsulate the students' learning experiences and the pedagogy implications of online learning are classified under four main categories. Informed by the coding agreement, the findings of the thematic map are presented in Figure 1.

### 3.1. Experience of a Sudden Transition to Online Learning

This theme explores participants' experience of the sudden transition from a face-to-face to an online learning mode. Almost all the research participants expressed that their experience of the sudden transition to online learning was initially challenging.

"In the first instance, it was so difficult to start but as time goes, I found it more flexible and convenient to learn online'm not highly useful in operating the laptop, everything started here in RGU".



**Figure 1.** Student learning experience.

In line with this finding, Par\_9 and Par\_12 declared that:

“It was not easy for me at the beginning, it took me at least few weeks to get help and be able to use online platforms, it is still a challenge but working on it”.

“Initially, the transition was difficult because I was used to classroom-based study. However, I can now manage my time and schedule my online sessions without the help of others even though I am more comfortable with classroom study”.

These views are supported by other studies that claim that transitions in teaching and learning often bring about changes [12]. In addition, Marasi, Jones and Parker [1] observed that transition brings about a significant paradigm shift in teaching and learning. Conversely, participants also revealed that they preferred the classroom face-to-face learning when contrasting their online experience with classroom learning; one stated that:

“I tried to manage through online learning for the progress of my course but I found out that it is difficult as I could not put in my total skill and the level of the engagement is not as the way it was for classroom learning”. (Par\_21)

This account of student experience of sudden transition aligns with other studies argument that often students do not immediately fit into changes, which alters or shapes how they make meaning of their learning [10]. In addition, it could be viewed that students’ experience of sudden transition is influenced by their ability to recognise how they could make a positive impact such that they are active participants in the entire learning process [34]. This allows learners to construct meanings from abstract and theoretical ideas that enhance their concrete knowledge. To enhance students’ learning ability, this study argues that the priority should be learners’ needs, while the learning experience process should be purposeful.

### 3.2. Benefits of Sudden a Transition to Online Learning

While COVID-19 has disrupted the teaching and learning process, this second theme reveals participants’ perceptions of what they have benefited from studying online since the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions. These benefits are sub-classified using the participants’ accounts into different themes, further discussed below.

#### 3.2.1. Digital Literacy

All the research participants have experienced improved ability in using digital technologies and different online learning platforms such as the academic Moodle page, MS Teams and Zoom in communicating and accessing information and engaging with learning materials and activities relevant to their study despite the sudden transition process they experienced. For example:

“Online learning has made my basic computer skills improve; I can now indulge in most areas of computer which I was not aware of previously”. Par\_3

“This has provided an opportunity to fully enhance my IT knowledge, I can now search for information online, am able to make use of certain software programmes to help with my learning”. Par\_22

The findings further revealed how much participants acknowledged that online learning had prompted their desire to explore and understand other aspects of digital literacy, such as software development, while pursuing an informal education in the field.

“This has prompted my pursuit of informal education in computer usage/ technology/ internet to further develop and enhance my already acquired skills. As constant change makes constant learning inevitable”. Par\_7

“Through online learning, I have to constantly learn how to use aspects of the software that pose as hurdles in my learning”. Par\_19

These examples present valid and strong support for the argument that informal learning exists “without direct reliance on a teacher or an externally organized curriculum”. Rather it is essentially voluntary and student led [35]. This also aligns with Gramatakos and Lavau’s [36] argument that informal learning plays alongside formal education.

### 3.2.2. Effective Time Management

Many participants felt comfortable planning and organising how to use their time between learning activities and events. From the students’ perspectives, having a clear picture of what to achieve and when for was frequently referred to. For example:

“Helping the student or learner to effectively plan and manage their time, being in control of their preferred study situation”. Par\_10

“I have had to do a lot of personal learning this period, but it has helped me personally to push myself and also helped with my time management”. Par\_24

“It also allows me to reorganize my study plan, I could do other things and yet work on my study project”. Par\_28

The findings revealed how much participants valued control over their learning. Some participants emphasised that studying online gave them the opportunity to complete more tasks in less time, even when under pressure and a tight schedule. Additionally, attention was directed towards time saved due to the lack of travelling to attend classroom teaching.

“I can read more books online than normal within some hours, so my ease of doing assignments and course work has been improved”. Par\_2

“In many respects, the “working from home” experience was positive as travelling time was significantly reduced in my case”. Par\_15

### 3.2.3. Encourages Independent Learning and Self-Development

During the interviews, the participants emphasised how the sudden transition to online learning created an avenue that enhanced their continuous personal development. This has further allowed the students to be self-aware, resulting in their understanding of ‘self’ and the development of self-efficacy in teaching and learning. For example:

“improved the way I manage myself, my communication skills, and responsibilities. I have developed an increased level of thinking”. Par\_3

“This has also availed me the opportunity to take on related courses, certifications for better development of my core competence”. Par\_14

“It helped me to engage myself into many trials and errors, initially I could not spend time on a laptop for a long time or may spend too long time on screen but gradually I was able to develop a plan that helps me organize my learning sessions”. Par\_26



Ultimately, online learning can foster independent learning and self-development. Some participants also alleged that online learning encouraged them to learn with little or no supervision as shown in the following excerpts.

“I am very comfortable attaining my own learning needs, with or without the assistance from others”. Par\_27

“I am willing to spawn creative ideas/solutions that will help in achieving my online learning needs with little or no help depending on the situation”. Par\_30

These participants’ views align with Kauffman [28] that online learning facilitates the development of self-directed learning skills.

#### 3.2.4. Fosters Collaboration

From the responses, it is observed that collaboration creates an avenue for tutors and students to work together to achieve the module identified learning objectives. In the interviews, participants expressed support for online learning, stimulating them to engage in collaborative activities. The following excerpts support this finding:

“I am always willing and on time to online meetings. It is my opportunity to see people during this challenging time, so I do not hesitate”. Par\_4

“I get to achieve and learn more than I would have if I tried to on my own. I also like assisting others when they get stuck”. Par\_8

“I am very much able and willing to meet online with other students now that before”. Par\_12

Besides participants’ support for online learning fostering collaboration, they identified different avenues through which collaboration could occur. Additionally, findings show that collaboration occurs between lecturers and their fellow students. In addition, it was observed in some cases that students have been prompted to engage in collaborative activities due to the challenging situation. The following excerpts support these findings:

“I had to phone friends to assist for the first couple of times after which I understood the process of signing on and taking part in the lecture activities”. Par\_1

“I am often actively engaged in live lectures and very much enjoy the collaborative working environment (much like normal work environments)”. Par\_5

“Learning outside the classroom gave me another experience of learning with my lecturers through blackboard interaction”. Par\_21

Dabbagh [37] argues that learners can talk to each other and form teams in real time and, typically at the same time, support the study findings that online learning fosters collaboration. This also aligns with Kauffman [28] that online learning promotes a sense of community among the learners via peer collaboration.

#### 3.2.5. Flexibility and Convenience

Research participants expressed the satisfaction of not being tied down to a fixed schedule and location given that students can attend live lectures or listen to pre-recorded lectures. Hence, students can engage with learning, including online activities, at their individual pace and schedule. According to the participants, for example:

“Online Learning has helped to bridge the gap that the current pandemic would have put on studies”. Par\_4

“I have been able to learn at the comfort of my home. With a tight schedule, I can decide to listen to a pre-recorded lecture”. Par\_18

“You determine the pace you study in online learning”. Par\_21

The findings resonate with Boyd’s [38] claim that online learning offers students more flexibility and convenience around other schedule demands. In addition, students can attend online classes at whatever time is productive for them and suits their availability.

### 3.3. Challenges of Online Learning

This third theme reveals participants' perceptions of the various setbacks that prevented students from engaging in sudden online learning. The identified sub-themes were viewed from several perspectives, such as technical requirements, students' attitudes to learning and environmental factors.

#### 3.3.1. Technical Challenges

Most students are not opportune to have access to a reliable and stable internet connection that can accommodate the online teaching and learning demand. Moreover, many students live in privately rented apartments and find it expensive to meet the technical requirements, such as bandwidth, associated with online studies. Some of them do not even own a personal computer as they rely on the facilities provided by the school through the university's library and IT labs. Hence, it becomes difficult for students to catch up with online classes, especially live sessions. For example:

"Basically, system freezes and hardware related challenges, internet freezes and network issues". Par\_1

"Poor broadband connectivity is a hurdle for online studying. In my case, sometimes internet connectivity is not up to standard and this has affected my follow-up of the online sessions". Par\_17

"Some of the challenges I faced were intermittent disruption of audio and video signals making it difficult to participate fully". Par\_29

These examples present a strong and valid finding that aligns with Kauffman's [28] argument that technical skills were most challenging for online learners.

#### 3.3.2. Lack of Concentration

From the interviews, it was observed that most students find it difficult to focus and maintain concentration while learning online. Their lack of concentration in online learning is associated with distractions from factors such as the physical environment, social media, television programmes and tiredness. The following excerpts support this finding:

"My zeal to learn outside the classroom has reduced because most times I feel lazy signing in for an online lecture and I get distracted easily since it's not classroom. I look at my phone i.e., chatting, watch tv etc". Par\_13

"It is harder for me to concentrate at home because of distractions and the sense of comfort attributed to being at home. It is easier to study in a neutral environment like in a library or on campus". Par\_22

"Studying at home also brings about a lot of environmental distractions from family members and dependants which would otherwise not occur through classroom study". Par\_29

#### 3.3.3. Lack of Tutor–Student Interaction

Lack of tutor demonstration is another sub-category identified as a key challenge in online learning. Research participants considered that online communication lacks any corresponding body language manifestation. According to the participants, the lack of correspondence may result in misunderstandings with students being emotionally disconnected and feeling isolated. The following excerpts support this finding:

"The face-to-face concentration and interpreting nonverbal cues in the teaching processes that all aid and contribute to the learning experience was lost". Par\_1

"Learning through the classroom is far better than learning online, this is based for the fact that you can see how the tutor demonstrates examples while learning and you can catch up through this pattern of learning but this process is absent through the online process". Par\_12



“Non-verbal communication has little platform through online study as opposed to classroom sessions where we can observe lecturers’ expressions and gestures”. Par\_19

Additionally, research participants emphasise the need for tutors to access their students’ body language. This will aid the tutors in engaging and motivating their students’ during learning. It is evident from the results of this study that tutors and students exhibit and exchange important clues through body language that is essential to teaching and learning which may be lacking in online teaching. According to Par\_11, for example:

“The fact that they cannot see the expressions of their student make their ability have to little impact on the students”.

The study finding resonates with Gray and DiLoreto’s [39] finding that students interacting with their instructors and actively having discussions with other students significantly influenced students’ satisfaction and perceived learning.

#### 3.3.4. Limited Engagement

Whilst some of the study participants assert that online learning fosters collaboration, some argued that building relationships and working with fellow students and tutors in online learning remains a major challenge. According to the participants, online learning limits the level of collaboration among students and the contributing factor played by the lack of physical presence. For example:

“The willingness to meet up with other students online seems poor. Not very good most especially if it does not relate to blackboard collaboration or learning”. Par\_13

“As I said, I learn better when I have people to discuss the concepts with and they are reachable physically. That hasn’t been available in this case which is a factor”. Par\_24

Research participants also claimed that limited engagement could exist among students or between them and their tutors. Likewise, participants emphasised some factors that may impact engagement in online learning. For example:

“Lack of interaction with lecturers and other students. Not all our lectures were presented online, leaving students relying on online material only”. Par\_5

“Being at home in my comfort zone had a little effect on my engagement, but the aim and purpose of my Masters journey was my motivating factor”. Par\_17

Kauffman [28], in support of the study, finds that online learning environment presents a unique challenge in how students can engage and interact during learning. This is consistent with Gray and DiLoreto’s [39] argument that students feel disconnected from their instructor and classmates, which is one of the challenges of online learning.

#### 3.3.5. Lack of Self-Motivation

From the participants’ views, there is growing concern about their lack of zeal to learn, ultimately impacting their learning effectiveness and how they learn. This has further resulted in most students suffering from personal and physical problems and lacking confidence. The following excerpts support these findings:

“I feel less motivated to study when compared to classroom lecture where I need to study ahead for the next classroom session”. Par\_3

“Diminished motivation. The fact that I am not physically present in a classroom with other students and the lecturer has diminished my self-motivation to study”. Par\_19

“It didn’t assure you the certainty or confidence you have in a classroom learning”. Par\_30

The participants' views are consistent with Herrington, Oliver and Reeves [40], who reported that students might have difficulty in that problems can arise if students are not self-motivated. This is consistent with Kauffman's [28] argument that the lack of self-motivation remains a significant underlying barrier in online learning. One could argue that because some of the students are accustomed to teacher-centred modes of instruction, they become unhappy when this directed support is withdrawn.

### 3.4. *Driving Factors for Successful Sudden Transition to Online Learning*

The participants' views indicate that certain success factors, such as ICT skills, student engagement and participation, adaptable environment and learning support, are essential to effective online learning.

#### 3.4.1. ICT Skills

As a minimum, research participants emphasised that online learners should have a basic understanding and knowledge of using technology to support their learning. This includes students' ability to use basic software and programs such as Microsoft package and being able to navigate the university's online Moodle platform. This view is further explained using the quote from the interviews:

"The onset of digitalization and of the internet of things warranted the need for proficiency in the use of technology and the current global pandemic of the coronavirus has made it even more essential to have a certain level of proficiency in the use of technology". Par\_17

#### 3.4.2. Student Engagement and Participation

To be successful in online studies, research participants emphasised that there should be avenues to encourage students to interact, engage and share ideas with other students. This will help create a classroom scenario in online learning. Additionally, participants claimed that it increases their focus and attention towards a meaningful online learning experience. The following excerpts support this finding:

"Peer collaboration, face to face teaching still play a key role in my learning as they avail me the opportunity to rub minds with others to aid my learning". Par\_11

"This required an increased level of concentration and high degree interaction within a specified time period". Par\_16

These excerpts further support the need to promote group activities among learners in online learning. This is consistent with Gray and DiLoreto's [39] suggestion that paying attention to the interaction between students and their tutors is essential. This is because student engagement and participation are important for increased student learning and retention.

#### 3.4.3. Adaptability and Taking Ownership

Another important theme that emerged from the interviews is related to the students' enthusiasm to take ownership of their studies to create the best learning experience. Similarly, learners must be willing and able to adjust to new learning conditions while migrating from classroom to online learning. This will thus prepare students for the challenges ahead while responding to evolving circumstances. The following excerpts support this finding:

"Success on the course depends on being able to adapt quickly and familiarize oneself with the modules, the virtual learning programmes and the whole learning experience". Par\_10

"When there is no in person interaction with tutors or students like you it requires self-discipline, commitment, and better study habits". Par\_13

“The fact that i am not physically present in a classroom with other students and the lecturer has diminished myself motivation to study. Thus, i have to be keen on motivating myself”. Par\_29

These excerpts align with Devonport and Lane [41] argument that the ability of learners to exert control over their learning influences their academic success and retention. Likewise, Hsieh, Sullivan and Guerra [42] added that learners with greater confidence in themselves could put in additional effort, initiate new things and endure in the face of challenges while mastering their new learning environment.

#### 3.4.4. Conducive Environment

Learning in an environment that is perceived to be conducive and supportive is another success factor that the research participants considered essential. Environmental factors such as background noise and poor learning layout are perceived to impact student satisfaction and self-motivation to learn. For example:

“Environmental factors that play a key role in my online learning include having a quiet space, preferably a personal study to aid concentration and avoid necessary distraction as I am easily distracted by environmental noise or disturbance”. Par\_11

“If the environment is noisy it can affect that and likewise if the environment is distractive it can as well affect the online learning outcomes”. Par\_20

The participants’ views align with Herrington, Oliver and Reeves [40] argument that the capacity of the learning environment is particularly essential to encourage students in online learning. This could be attributed to learners’ isolation being a limiting factor against successful engagement in online teaching and learning.

#### 3.4.5. Learning Support

Learning support is another category that emerged from this study, and it evaluates different types of support that may be available to support students’ learning process. According to the research participants, learning support includes feedback, guidance in accessing the school online learning platform and online learning materials.

**Feedback:** Providing students with constructive and consistent feedback remains essential to learning. Hence, research participants emphasised how promptly they were provided with feedback, and the benefit of such feedback contributed to their learning. For example:

“Teachers were very supportive, feedback concerning our experience on the virtual learning was frequently sought, queries and inquiries were responded to very quickly”, Par\_10

“The lack of face to face interactions with the tutor cannot be overlooked. However, I got value from all the sessions as most of the tutor were willing to provide support or clarifications timely”. Par\_21

**Moodle accessibility:** Easy access and interaction with the university’s online learning platform for learning materials, communication and learning activities contribute to students’ learning experience. The following excerpts support this finding:

“There was basic guidance on how to access the sessions as well as navigate the virtual classroom tools”. Par\_2

“Using the software, this was a huge area of help from my tutor especially using project management material. The tutor was very hands-on and involved in helping students learn how to use the software”. Par\_19

**Teaching and learning materials:** The study participants emphasised how the learning materials provided by the tutors and the university are supportive and adding value to their learning and personal development. The following excerpts support this finding:

“The school sent out video and audio guides on how the platforms will operate and contact persons in case of issues”. Par\_4

“Tutors were very supportive with materials and additional sections”. Par\_6

Table 2 summarises the study findings.

**Table 2.** Categories and sub-categories.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
	1. Experience of sudden transition to online learning
2. Benefits of sudden transition to online learning	i. Digital literacy
	ii. Effective time management
	iii. Encourages independent learning and self-development
	iv. Fosters collaboration
	v. Flexibility and convenience
3. Challenges of sudden transition to online learning	i. Technical challenges
	ii. Lack of concentration
	iii. Lack of tutor–student interaction
	iv. Limited engagement
	v. Lack of self-motivation
4. Driving factors for successful sudden transition to online learning	i. ICT skills
	ii. Student engagement and participation
	iii. Adaptability and taking ownership
	iv. Conducive environment
	v. Learning support

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper explores and evaluates the learning experience of on-campus face-to-face students whose learning was suddenly moved online. The findings of this study primarily address the student experience of a sudden transition to online learning, the benefits, challenges and driving factors for a sudden transition to online learning due to uncertainties, disruptions and restricted movements, such as in the case of COVID-19. While there are benefits and advantages of online learning, the findings of this study further identify some of the challenges that students may experience. For students to derive benefits from the sudden transition to online teaching and learning, there is a need to address some of the challenges of online learning that can prevent knowledge and skills acquisition. The driving factors consist of different key result areas that the students perceived as vital in facilitating successful migration from a face-to-face learning mode to an online mode of learning. All the research participants affirmed that they were delighted in the continuity of their study, especially how the university had minimized the disruption imposed by COVID-19 on their learning. However, they also expressed disappointment while narrating the challenges of migrating to the online mode of learning.

According to the findings of this study (Table 2), the development of digital literacy skills among students new to the online mode of learning was one of the main benefits identified in this study. This suggests that online learning gives students the confidence needed to fit into the digital workplace. Additionally, effective time management and a flexible learning pace are key benefits associated with the online learning mode. These findings suggest that students can get more done in less time and at their own pace, even under pressure and a tight schedule. In addition, encouraging independent learning and self-development is an essential benefit linked to online learning. Although existing studies (such as [43]) have identified the benefits of an online mode of learning that aligns with the

current study findings, this present study further considered the effects of uncertainties and disruptions, such as the emergence of COVID-19 that have not been considered in education research. The uncertainties associated with online teaching and learning pose a significant risk to students' learning as this could affect the attainment of the intended benefits. Additionally, it could give rise to a negative impact on students, consequently bringing about anxiety and stress. Hence, preparing learners for uncertainty to achieve the benefits of learning remains a major focus area for the constructivism learning theory. It becomes imperative for tutors and the university at large to develop and implement appropriate teaching and learning strategies that would prepare students for the uncertain world while maximizing the benefits of online learning.

While students can access and attempt online study at any location, the online mode of learning poses several challenges, such as technical challenges, lack of concentration, lack of tutor demonstration, limited engagement and lack of self-motivation. These are consistent with previous studies on students online learning experiences [39,44]. However, the findings of this study show that many challenges students experience when migrating to the online mode of learning affect not only their learning experience but also their personal and physical meaningfulness. This suggests the need for tutors and the university to provide students with behavioural and psychological support to achieve their full learning potential. Additionally, such support will ensure that students possess the appropriate knowledge, attitude and preparedness to manage the challenges that are inherent in online learning. This could be achieved by carrying out a one-off assessment of each student to determine each student's support needs.

Success factors for the online mode of learning is another important area of focus in this study. According to this study's findings, basic ICT skills, student engagement and participation, adaptability and taking ownership, and a conducive learning environment are relevant predictors of success in online learning. This is consistent with Eastin and LaRose's [45] argument that it is important to consider circumstances and put in place variables such as technical skills that will enable success in an online learning environment. These factors enhance student success and positively impact students' learning experiences.

## 5. Implications and Future Research

Capitalizing on the online mode of learning to facilitate teaching has reshaped students' orientation, as well as higher education institutions and society at large. This paper provides an understanding of the online learning experience that comprises four elements: benefits of online learning, challenges of online learning, success factors in online learning and support in online learning. Thus, the arrangement for these learners requires a peculiar response to their online experience.

Findings from this study show that the online mode of learning can be an avenue through which higher institutions can support students in developing essential personal development skills such as time management and the confidence to function and fit into the future job market. It becomes imperative for tutors and the university to consider approaches that will help students develop their skills when developing and implementing online education programmes. This can support effective teaching practices for tutors and facilitate a positive learning experience for students.

More essentially, the lack of tutor–student interaction is a major challenge in an online mode of learning, and higher institutions should assess their students' digital wellbeing periodically. This calls for higher institutions to incorporate and encourage online interactive live sessions or lecture delivery that may enhance students' engagement and mental state. This teaching method will allow the online teaching process to move away from the current "glass and paper" approach that does not contribute to students' learning experience and development [9]. This can be strategic in mitigating poor student engagement and motivation during learning. It should be a means of facilitating tutors' responsibility in promoting effective learning experiences for online students. Students are therefore given the opportunity to consider and assess tutors' non-verbal communication features such as

body language manifestation as a part of their learning experience. Additionally, it could be instrumental in helping students connect emotionally with their learning while dealing with feelings of self-isolated.

Moreover, the lack of a system to assess students' technical and environmental needs when migrating to online learning mode was a key concern for students. Although this will put more responsibility on the university and its staff (both academic and non-academic staff) with respect to providing the students with adequate support for success in the online mode of learning, it could also be a strategic means of fostering a smooth transition for students that fall into this category. There is a need to assess the technical proficiency and environmental needs of each student through a one-off evaluation process to determine each student's support needs.

The student sample size and the context for this research are considered the main limitation of this study. There is a need to replicate the study in other divisions of a higher institution other than the business school, such as construction and engineering, which engage students more with hands-on and practical teaching using other methods of data collection such as quantitative and mixed method. Additionally, it will be worthwhile for future studies to explore tutors' experiences and contrast it with the student's experience. It is worth stating that it is not in the focus of this paper to assess the quality of teaching and materials provided by tutors. Hence, future studies should assess students' learning experience concerning the quality of teaching and learning materials made available online by tutors.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, O.A.O. and A.O.; methodology, A.O.; software, O.A.O.; validation, A.O.; formal analysis, O.A.O.; investigation, O.A.O. and A.O.; resources, O.A.O.; data curation, A.O.; writing—original draft preparation, O.A.O. and A.O.; writing—review and editing, O.A.O. and A.O.; visualization, O.A.O.; supervision, A.O.; project administration, A.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The research received no funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Robert Gordon University and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Robert Gordon University on the 13th of July 2020.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not Applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank the participants for participating in the research. We also thank the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and feedback, enhancing the quality of the manuscript.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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