

EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING AND SUPPORT IN ONLINE COURSES IN OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDIES

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Abstract: *Studying online has increased in recent decades. In this study, we investigated 1) how adult students experience their learning through online courses, and 2) the support and guidance they receive in an online course? The data were collected through an electronic questionnaire with 182 respondents and analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. The findings highlight the importance of interaction with peers and instructors, which, according to the respondents, leads to a profound and broad understanding of the subject being studied. The findings also show that instructional and peer supports for online courses were felt to facilitate studying when easily accessible. However, some adult and experienced students felt that they did not need much instructional support and guidance or peer support. In the future, it will be important to take into account the diversity of the open university student population and their different needs.*

Keywords: *online learning, online course, higher education, student experiences, instructional support and guidance, interaction.*



INTRODUCTION

Online learning is a rapidly growing field of education worldwide because it provides flexible and convenient access to educational opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds and geographical areas who often cannot access higher education through other means (Farrell & Bruton, 2020; Roddy et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the number of online universities (Rivera-Vargas et al., 2021) and according to Stuart et al. (2022), online learning is now a core feature of the higher education system and will remain an enduring legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is unlikely to replace traditional higher education, rather, it will serve as an alternative (Sun & Chen, 2016).

This study looks at online course experiences at the University of Jyväskylä, where adult students mainly study online. The reasons for studying can vary. Students enroll in individual courses or study units for personal interest, for further education, or eventually to apply for a degree program. Online learning offers flexibility to adult students, who often are balancing extra responsibilities (Roddy et al., 2017). They face similar challenges as traditional students but also endure additional stressors (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Rivera-Vargas et al., 2021); the most challenging aspect for online students is balancing study with work, family, and caring responsibilities. However online learning may be time-efficient (Jaggars, 2014), it reduces traveling, and working at home can be better suited to one's own of learning.

Rahmani, Groot and Rahmani (2024) reported that graduation rates are clearly lower from online programs than from programs offered in a traditional setting. Interactions in online learning present challenges. Dixon (2010) and Alqurashi (2019) point out the importance of recognizing that effective interaction occurs only if learning and instruction are well designed and implemented. Online studies also require self-direction and self-regulation, which may be particularly challenging for young adult students (Soffer & Cohen, 2019). Time management and organizational skills are also key factors that determine online student success (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Rahmani et al., 2024).

Instructional Support and Guidance

The flexible nature of online education enables adult students to integrate their learning with their other duties, provided that they are adequately supported (Rotar, 2022a). Instructional support and guidance for student learning are the key elements that can optimize student learning experiences in any learning environment (Lee et al., 2011). Instructional support and guidance include, but is not limited to, answering students' questions and reminding them to turn in assignments. The instructor's presence is a vital factor that contributes to students' online learning experiences (Caskurlu et al., 2021), and students' perceptions of teaching presence affect their engagement (Gökoğlu et al., 2024). The lack of interaction between instructors and students is one of the most outstanding disadvantages of online teaching environments, making students feel isolated (Saraç & Doğan, 2022). This article uses the term instructor as interchangeable with teacher to emphasize the teacher's guiding role.

The instructor's responsive communication and tailored help sessions (Lee et al., 2011), as well as timely, personal, and meaningful feedback, affect the progress of the diverse online student population (e.g., Rotar, 2022b). For example, for distance students, using different forms of feedback can best meet the needs of all students and offer them the opportunity to

engage with different technologies. Feedback helps to improve learning by informing students of their current achievements and guiding them toward meeting their learning goals effectively (Theobald & Bellhäuser, 2022). Students may not maintain their work efforts without instructor feedback, which assures them they are on the right track (Alqurashi, 2019). Thus, the role of the instructor is to provide support, guidance, and assistance to all students according to their individual needs.

Interaction with an instructor and peers significantly enhances students' online learning experiences (Soffer & Cohen, 2019), as instructors often represent the course (Roddy et al., 2017). Students want instructors who support, listen to, and communicate with them (Caskurlu et al., 2021). Earlier studies have shown that online students are prone to display higher engagement and satisfaction if they perceive the instructor's presence through interactive tools and if they have opportunities to interact with the instructor, other learners, and the learning content (Dixson, 2010; Gökoğlu et al., 2024).

Peer Learning and Peer Support

Peer learning is communication between or among students for the purpose of exchanging and sharing information or ideas, doing group activities, and giving feedback to each other (Alqurashi, 2019). Getting peer feedback promotes learning, but reading the texts of peers is also a learning experience (Tsui & Ng, 2000). Both can occur with or without an instructor. As shown by Farrell and Brunton (2020), peer discussions and debate enhance students' learning experiences and deepen their understanding of the course content. However, some studies have found that students prefer instructor feedback over peer feedback (e.g., Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

As reported by Lee et al. (2011), peer support refers to peer-to-peer learning that involves students supporting each other on academic or non-academic issues. When peer learning works and social interaction becomes an important part of learning, the young adult students are more involved in helping other students and feel a sense of belonging to a learning community (Lee et al., 2011). Shepherd et al. (2024) found that while most adult students value a sense of community, some prioritize completing their degree over community engagement. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of successful interaction for learning from various perspectives in online studies. For example, Farrell and Brunton (2020) showed that the role of peers was valued as part of the learning experience and as a source of support. Dixson (2010) found that online students were more engaged in the learning process when they could interact with the instructor and their peers, and Holzweiss et al. (2014) noted that peer interactions enhanced students' understanding of the course material.

Evaluating how students perceive their learning is an important way to improve the quality of online courses in aspects such as course design, delivery, and evaluation and to enhance students' learning experience (Alqurashi, 2019). According to Repo et al. (2014), instructional support and guidance for adult students should be further developed in a student-oriented manner considering their life situation (age, educational background, reason for studying). Rotar's (2022a) systematic literature review also showed that more attention should be paid to the importance of student support in the future. The open university student population is more diverse than the group of degree students, which have been studied clearly more compared to open university students. The open university student population has a wide age range, they

have other responsibilities (work and family life), and not all are studying towards degree goals. More research is needed on students' experiences of learning and support in online studies.

The purpose of the study was to examine adult students' experiences of learning and instructional support and guidance in the Jyväskylä Open University Finnish online courses. The specific research questions were:

1. How do open university students experience their learning through online courses?
2. How do open university students experience the support and guidance in an online course?

METHODS

Research Context

An open university is a unique learning environment compared to a regular university because all citizens can begin their studies there, regardless of their educational background, profession, etc., but not widely researched argues Repo et al. (2014). Finland does not have one national open university, like Open University UK in Great Britain, but each university has own open university. The open universities in Finland offer teaching that is carried out based on the higher education institution's own syllabus (Opintopolku, 2024). Degrees cannot be completed in any open university in Finland, a large number of students study for a degree later. However, some students only study for further education or for fun, without any other educational goals. The open university offers university studies from all faculties, and they are low cost, or free of charge. The student population is therefore very diverse, as in other European open universities (Müller, 2013). In Finland, studying at an open university is more common than in many other European open universities (Müller, 2013). The role of the open university as part of higher education studies has been constantly growing as a pathway to a higher education degree (Opetushallitus, 2025).

Studying at the open university takes place mainly online. The most common modes of study are "open book exams" (a web examination in which students are allowed to use their course material while the exam is being conducted), written assignments (essays), online courses, and classroom teaching. The online course usually consists of various tasks and materials accessed in an e-learning environment and conducted with a jointly shared schedule. However, the course can be completed regardless of the time and place. Some tasks are independent while others are done in a group. Participants in the course can receive instructional support and guidance, peer support and feedback.

Participants

The questionnaire for the present study was sent to 960 students who had participated in Finnish online courses at the University of Jyväskylä. We received 182 responses. At the time of the survey, some students may have attended several open university online courses. However, the same respondent was only able to answer the survey once. Each respondent answered every question. The age gap was wide (from under 25 to over 64 years old), most (44%). The group was also diverse in terms of educational level, but most students had a master's degree (41%).

Data Collection

The data were collected via a web-based (Webropol) survey, which was sent by email to all students participating in online courses at the open university. The questionnaire was developed based on previous research on online course experiences (Dobbs et al., 2017; Roddy et al., 2017) and interaction in online learning environment (Sher, 2009). The instructors of online courses sent a link to the survey to their students, and later one reminder message. The data was collected during the year 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Answering the questionnaire was voluntary. The respondents gave their consent to participate in the study by answering the questionnaire. In this study we focused on qualitative analysis of open-ended answers. The seven open-ended questions are in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

Since thematic analysis has been considered as suitable for exploring experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it was used in the present study. In thematic analysis, as in this study, the aim is not to create a new theory but to describe, analyze, interpret and report in detail the themes emerging from the material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). No predetermined coding frameworks or researcher assumptions were adopted. The first author read and reread the data and identified initial codes related to the research questions (1st phase “Familiarizing yourself with your data”; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors discussed the codes several times and generated themes (2nd phase “Generating initial codes”; Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were reviewed and named (3rd phase “Searching for themes” and 4th. “Reviewing themes”, Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of colours facilitated coding and thematization, for example, yellow marked codes and themes related to learning, and green marked codes and themes related to instructional support and guidance. In this way, two main themes related to research question 1 were interaction and profound understanding, and three main themes related to research question 2 were structure, flexibility, and instructional support and guidance. (“5th phase “Defining and naming themes”, Braun & Clarke, 2006). The unit of analysis varied between a word, a sentence, and a longer passage. The sub-theme of the interaction was, for example, peer learning and discussion with other students. The last step of the analysis was the report. The information was in Finnish, because students were Finnish speaking, and the quotes in this article were translated into English by the authors and checked by native English-speaking professional.

FINDINGS

Students’ experiences: Peer Learning Leads to Profound Understanding

The participants gained a strong experience of peer learning during their online studies. **Peer support** came up in several answers, such as: “In the online course, I get advice and encouragement from peers...” Advice and encouragement from peers were mentioned in several responses, but only a few responses opened up further about them. Apparently, peers were more excited about the subject being learned, as is evident from one answer: “Discussions with peers encourage us to investigate the matter in more detail...” Many expressions were

related to peer learning and interaction (e.g., “through interaction you can gain insights”). A sense of belonging was also mentioned: “... you get the feeling of belonging to the student community.”

Discussion and working with peers can be fruitful and rewarding. For example, through discussion, students can obtain practical experiences from working life. In addition, interaction with peers enhanced the understanding of the subject being studied, as one participant explained: “I feel that the contents of the course are easier to understand through conversations than by thinking alone, and the contents stick in my mind...” In the online course, the students feel a necessity to stick to the schedule and complete the tasks on time because doing this also affects the progress of the studies of their peers: “... working with others helps to complete the studies quickly.” The fact that a student in an online course is accountable to others and must think about the progress of peers means that the interaction with others also promotes the student’s own study: “The progress of the course requires everyone’s participation and work input, interaction, and sociality. I can’t get anything done alone.”

In addition to support and working with peers’ online communication was found to be easier. Giving **peer feedback**, and especially expressing an opposite opinion or view, may be easier online than in face-to-face interactions in the classroom, as one comment made clear: “Some conversations succeed even better online than face-to-face. For example, it may be easier to present criticism in peer review discussion.”

According to findings, understanding and internalizing the things being studied are important in learning. When participants are students at the open university, they usually already have substantial study and work experience, which can be seen, for example, in how they can reflect on their learning and how they benefit from interaction with their peers. The participants described their learning using several expressions, including “profound understanding,” “development of thinking,” “understanding of broadened entities,” and “internalizing the subject from different perspectives.” Learning with peers was described, for example, in the following way:

A variety of tasks and the progress of studying ... so that it leads the student to a more comprehensive internalization of the subject, working with other students. It is interesting to hear different points of view on the subject being studied. It deepens and broadens the understanding of the subject, and through it, you have to invest more in reflectivity and reflective thinking; it forces you to think about things more broadly and from many perspectives ...

According to the results, online students experienced that interaction could promote learning and often reflects positively on their grades: “Interaction with other students and the teacher clearly broadens, deepens, and improves my understanding of the subject I am studying. This is also reflected in the grades...”

Thus, issues related to peer learning are clearly considered to lead to a profound and broad understanding of the subject of study. Studying for an exam is often seen as the opposite of interactive and in-depth learning. Students usually study for an exam by reading books or learning material alone, when things may be studied superficially and learned by heart. One student described it like this: “The topics studied were discussed extensively and in such a way that you really understand them. My thinking developed in a completely different way [in an online course] than, for example, when I was studying for an exam in a panic.”

The peer learning experience was mainly seen as supporting learning; however, some contrary observations were made. For example, some participants felt that other students or their comments could not always be trusted, and the correct answers could remain unclear, as shown in the following example: “Since there were no instructor’s comments in all courses, it was sometimes difficult to know whether the things written by other students were right or wrong. That is, do you trust the answers of others or not...”

In open university studies, the principle is that everyone, regardless of age, background education, etc., can participate in courses. However, this diverse background caused frustration: “There are also too many other students on the online course who have weaker learning and study skills than I do. Guiding them by the instructor also takes time.” Although the online interaction was mostly satisfying, some students found it superficial: “An online course is certainly intended to create more dialogue between students, but in an online environment and when people have never met before, that dialogue can remain minimal...”

Some students had difficulty in publishing their own creations/texts for (strange) fellow students to see: “I noticed in this course that I wrote answers all the time thinking about what other students would think [about them] ...” The difficulty in publishing one’s own texts for others to see arose from the fact that the interaction remained superficial or because the student was not used to this kind of interactive way of studying, where at least part of the tasks/texts are visible to everyone. Students could also stress their skills, especially at the beginning of their studies. If the students participating in the online course know each other from before, the interaction can feel more natural and easier in the online course.

Instructional Support and Guidance Make Studying Easier

The students’ experiences of the instructional support and guidance were related to three themes: the (ready-made) structure of the online course, its flexibility, and guidance and the instructor’s presence. By **structure**, the respondents mean the common schedule and structure of the online course (i.e., the tasks must be done according to a specific schedule and often in a specific order). In this case, the tasks must be done on time, and the course can be completed more easily. This came up in several responses: “The advantage of the online course is also that I can probably finish my studies in the planned schedule; it moves like a train toward its destination...”

Concentrating on one subtask at a time is perceived as an easier and less intensive way to complete the course (e.g., in the middle of a busy everyday life). With this help, the most important subject to be learned is outlined, such as in exams, for example, when the student has to independently structure and manage large entities, as one comment shows: “[on the online course], studying is a little more guided and structured, so that the studies progress sensibly and on a faster schedule when there is a schedule created by the instructor. However, it is possible to complete the studies in smaller parts compared to exams.” Conversely, the online course is not necessarily offered throughout the academic year. Therefore, the online course does not always fit the students’ schedules, and the students must choose another mode of study if they want to progress in their studies.

The scheduling of the online course was described as suitably strict but also as giving the students the opportunity to go at their own pace. The schedule of the online course is rarely tied to the time of day or week, which makes it possible to participate in online courses while

working. The **flexibility** of studying is also mentioned in the answers related to support. Flexibility means that the students can study at their own pace: “The schedule of the online course structure [shows] what to do, but within the time frames, tasks can be done on the days of the week and at the times of the day you want.” However, the finished schedule does not please everyone, as one student’s comment shows: “I’m not motivated to study by the schedule given in advance...”. Not everyone needs a ready-made schedule and (continuous) instructional support and guidance to progress in their studies, because they know how to manage their time and have self-discipline; therefore, progressing in their studies does not create challenges.

Naturally, flexibility also means that students can conceivably complete their studies remotely/at home. In this way, life situations (e.g., single parenthood) or weak financial situations do not become obstacles to studying, as one student concluded: “It was really nice when the instructor gave real-time online lectures. There was no need to travel and stay (a plus from an economic and ecological point of view), and yet the teaching was interactive...”

Structure and flexibility are often factors in which the modes of study differ. Exams and written assignments are seen as the most flexible modes of study, and face-to-face teaching as the most binding method of performance, as one respondent summed up well:

In the online course, the subject matter has been broken down into smaller parts and will be reviewed as planned and scheduled. It’s not quite as free studying as reading for an exam or doing a written assignment (essay), but it’s not as binding as face-to-face study.

The online course is therefore seen as an intermediate between traditional lecturing in a classroom and completely independent online learning: “I find online courses to be a meaningful compromise between face-to-face teaching and taking [open book] exams.”

Online learning makes study possible, even if the student has health-related challenges or issues related to learning/studying that do not allow participation in classroom teaching. An online course seems to be suitable for many students, regardless of whether they have physical limitations or psychological challenges: “I don’t like going to face-to-face lectures, too many distractions and trouble.” The student later clarified that studying in the classroom makes it difficult for her to maintain attention and concentrate on studying, which is easier at home.

The online course is also a suitable mode of study when a student has for example a challenge related to reading: “I don’t like long exams because I’m a slow reader.” In an online course, the students can spend as much time as they want doing the assignments, within the deadlines. Accessibility and easily available instructional support and guidance in the online course emerged in particular in those answers that compared different modes of study. In this answer, a challenge related to the student’s physical health (joint problems) emerges:

The schedule was suitable and the online course as a new way of studying seemed suitable for me, with its flexibility and support. This mode of study was easier for a person who is suffering from joint problems than a long continuous written exam. Now I can write in shorter periods...

Usually, the instructor does not even get to know whether the students have special needs. The student’s disability or special feature does not necessarily affect studying in the online course at all. This is what a student with a hearing impairment said: “[in the online course], chat and written dialogue is sometimes easier when you are hearing impaired [than during face-to-face teaching, for example] when you don’t have to struggle with hearing...”

In addition to the structure and flexibility of the online course, the answers by the online students regarding support are related to **instructional support and guidance** and **the instructor's presence**. Students feel that asking for advice is easier in an online course than when studying in other modes: "The instructor is more approachable, low threshold to ask for advice..." As explained by the students, support and guidance is more accessible in an online course than when studying in other modes of study: "Of course, guidance is more easily available [in an online course] than, for example, when writing an assignment." Discussion forums, called course cafés in Moodle's learning environment, make asking questions and requesting guidance easy during the course: "It's easier and faster to approach with a question. You can also get advice without asking through the [course] café."

In online courses, the instructors guide the entire group of students in common, but they also provide individual instructional support and guidance as needed. In addition, the instructor usually ensures that all students stay on schedule and return assignments to the right place at the right time, as shown in the following example: "Each task had separate detailed instructions, which was good. If I missed a task ..., I was personally contacted."

In the online course, the instructor's role emphasizes guidance and support. The learner is seen as an active processor of information and not as a passive recipient of knowledge (King, 1993). Some students may perhaps expect this as well in an online course, as the instructor guides the discussion and tells the "right answers." One student thought about the instructor's guiding role as follows:

In my opinion, studying is also something that opens the fact that you can talk to an expert instructor about the subject and thereby get something out of it that might not be noticed by your classmates or your own thoughts. But I understand that it is a conscious solution that this is not realized in this mode of study, that the teachers are more in the background, serving a guiding role.

All students may not yet be used to the fact that one right answer or solution may not exist for everything, and that you can learn from peers even better than from an instructor. The open university students usually have substantial work experience; thus, peers can obtain practical examples from working life and different perspectives on the topics discussed.

Instructors' feedback practices also vary in online courses. Not all students were satisfied with the feedback they received on the online course. Some would have liked more - and more detailed - feedback:

I would have liked more feedback on the exam and individual tasks. The feedback in some way makes you more committed to the course when you know that the evaluator has spent time reading the task that was done with effort.

In all courses, the student may not get personal feedback from the instructor, at least on all assignments. One student thought the joint feedback was not sufficient: "I don't get as much out of the joint feedback of the online courses as I do from the feedback of the written assignments, and the determination of the grade is therefore not particularly clear." In addition, not all students find peer feedback reliable:

I received feedback on the interim assignments, and in them, the instructor guided me on what should be done differently or more in the future. I received no other guidance. I would have missed the instructor's commentary and guidance in group discussions. The interpretations of the texts in the group discussions seemed "wild" at times. The "correct" interpretations were left unresolved.

Grades were also a concern in an online course. The answer of one student indicates that the grade from the course tells more than just the approved performance:

This course did not give grades but was assessed as pass/fail. When I received a grade from the online exam, I realized that I would have also needed feedback that would have focused solely on my areas of development. That way, I could have prepared those parts more and the exam would have gone better...

That students receive instructional support and guidance during the online course and not only at the end of the course was also perceived as important: “I would have needed more support for the fact that the grade did not become my own goal, and I would have hoped for information during the course that the performance was not sufficient.” The student may also consider face-to-face feedback to be the best:

The best feedback I’ve received has been personal feedback given face-to-face, where I’ve really had time to focus on, for example, the content and structure of the returned essay, as well as broader written feedback on my own text. In guiding an online course, the guidance will inevitably be a little more “faceless.”

In an online course, feedback can be given face-to-face, although remotely. However, in open university studies, written feedback is the most common of all delivery methods, including courses held as face-to-face teaching.

DISCUSSION

This study involved a typical group of open university students (e.g., varying in age, educational background, and experiences with online learning). Online learning can therefore suit the needs of a diverse group of students since it can meet many different needs (e.g., Martin & Bolliger, 2018). The aim of this qualitative study was to collect experiences of the adult students of open university when they studied online. Supporting a diverse student body in online learning is necessary (Rotar, 2022), demanding, and therefore knowledge of their experiences can help develop it (Alqurashi, 2019). According to this study, students' experiences of learning in online courses are enhanced by interaction with the instructor and peers, and learning is facilitated by instructional support and guidance.

Interaction as an Important Element in Online Studies

The findings of this study revealed that the role of peers is an important part of learning experiences, and that fellow students serve as a source of support in online courses. Peer learning can be a worthwhile and valuable part of a student's online course experience (e.g., Soffer & Cohen, 2019). As reported by Farrell and Brunton (2020) and Holzweiss et al. (2014), discussion and debate with classmates enhanced student learning experiences and profoundly enhanced their understanding of the subject being studied. In addition, a learning environment that encourages the sharing of learning experiences builds a sense of community among students and supports teamwork (e.g., Caskurlu et al., 2021). Interaction with the instructor and peers also allows for better engagement in the learning process (Holzweiss et al., 2014). Clearly, the online courses of the open university have been successfully built in such a way

that interaction and learning with peers are seen as important and functional elements in learning.

Some students wanted to complete their studies independently and use the time reserved for studying efficiently without interacting with peers. Therefore, the availability of different modes of study is important, allowing the students to choose the most suitable mode when options are available. However, it may sometimes also be good if the students try a mode of study that is not already familiar to them. For example, writing an essay develops abilities in scientific writing. The online course emphasizes peer learning and interaction. Open book exams require students to be able to study independently.

There are studies that indicate that students feel that the interaction between the instructor and the student in online studies is more important than the interaction between the students themselves (e.g., Caskurlu et al., 2021). The need for peer support is not necessarily the same for open university students as it is for young degree students, because the online students often already have permanent support networks in the form of family, friends, and colleagues (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Repo et al., 2014). Interaction with peers can also be seen as an imposed requirement, rather than as a benefit (Caskurlu et al., 2021).

Instructional Support and Guidance in Online

The schedule of online courses made it easier to study, as the assignments had to be completed on time. The instructor made sure that everyone returned their assignments on time and offered help if needed. The instructor's presence and guidance were therefore seen as important factors in online courses. This finding is in line with the results of previous research (e.g., Caskurlu et al., 2021). Students appreciate that the instructor answers their questions quickly, as they can continue their work when they get a quick answer to an issue that is bothering them. This idea has also emerged in previous studies (e.g., Lee et al., 2011).

In the online course, guidance is available as needed. Some students have good study skills and are therefore self-directed and self-confident. Although the students at an open university are usually well-educated, their master's degrees may be very old, and they may find the use of information technology in online learning new and challenging, at least at the beginning of their studies. Today, technology is used in studying, but studying in other ways has certainly changed over the decades. Students' needs and expectations from guidance therefore vary and must be considered (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016).

According to this study, receiving feedback from both the instructor and peers was considered important. Although peers are not as important for adult learners in terms of community as they are for young graduate students, receiving and giving peer feedback was felt to be important from a learning perspective. However, feedback from a teacher was perceived as the most reliable.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The aim of this study was to study the open university students' experiences of learning and support in online courses. Interaction with both the instructors and peers was considered important. Instructional support and guidance, on the other hand, make studying easier.

Therefore, it is worth investing in these matters in the future and taking into account the diversity of the open university student population and their different needs. The participants are students from only one open university. Such a study could be conducted with multiple universities, including those from other countries than Finland.

The present study has some limitations that must be considered. Some of the respondents (16%) said that they only had experience with one online course, by which they only had experience with one type of online course. Consequently, their understanding of online courses may be weak, and they presumably compare their experience with more familiar ways of studying (i.e., face-to-face teaching). However, most of the respondents in the present study were experienced online students. Unlike elsewhere, the open university did not switch to online teaching due to the pandemic. The capabilities for online teaching already existed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This study involved only a few students with disabilities or some other feature which affected their learning and/or studying, but they are present in open university courses. This study showed that interaction, instructional support and guidance are important for adult online students from different life situations in open universities' online courses. Future research could focus on students who have difficulties in learning, disabilities or some other features which affect learning. It is essential to continue to monitor and meet the needs of students in the online environment so that online courses can adapt to changing future needs (e.g., Roddy et al., 2017). Knowledge of what kind of instructional support and guidance would best serve these students is crucial, since open universities are for all.

Data Availability Statement

The research material is stored and processed in accordance with the information security and data protection practices of the University of Jyväskylä. This study is one of the partial studies of the dissertation. This DATA material will be destroyed when the dissertation is completed.

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Appendix

The seven open-ended questions

Which subject did you study in the online course?

Why did you choose an online format to complete this course?

How do you think studying in an online course you have just completed differs from studying in other ways?

Are you planning to attend an online course in the future? Why or why not?

Comments concerning the instructional support and guidance you received.

According to your experience, how does the counseling you receive in an online course differ from the guidance you receive when you study in other ways?

What do you think is the best mode of study for completing a course in Open University (e.g., general exam, distance exam, learning assignment, online assignment, or online course) from the perspective of your learning and why?