

Exploring University Students' Experiences of Online Learning and Engagement

Aigerim Millyatova

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Educational Leadership

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education

April, 2025

Word count: 15 001

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Astana 010000
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Date: 23 of October, 2024

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Aigerim Millyatova

This letter confirms that your research project, titled:

Exploring University Students' Experiences of Online Learning and Engagement

(a) has been approved by the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University.

You may contact your preferred research site and commence your participant recruitment strategy.

Yours sincerely,

Munya Hwami, PhD

On behalf of:

Dr Syed Abdul Manan, *PhD*
Chair, GSE Ethics Committee
Graduate School of Education
Nazarbayev University

Block C3, Room 5032
Office: +7(7172)6016
Mobile: +77079240053
email: syed.manan@nu.edu.kz, gse.irec@nu.edu.kz

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Munyaradzi Hwami, for his continuous guidance, encouragement, and invaluable support throughout this journey of writing my thesis. His advice and constant motivation helped me to stay focused and meet every deadline.

I am also grateful to the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University for giving me the opportunity to be part of this wider academic community, where I could learn, grow, and connect with others.

A special thanks to my parents, who supported me emotionally and financially during my entire time at university. Their help and encouragement meant more than I can express.

I also want to thank my groupmates, whose support made this journey feel a little less difficult. Working alongside them and sharing both challenges and small victories made the experience much easier to handle.

Thank you to everyone who stood by me during this time.

Abstract

Exploring University Students' Experiences of Online Learning and Engagement

Student engagement is an important aspect of learning that ensures that students relate to the learning environment. Since the COVID outbreak, many educational institutions have adopted remote learning because it has introduced accessibility, safety and convenience of learning. Despite its advantages, problems such as low student engagement or disengagement with e-learning format of studies remain persistent up to this day. This study explored student engagement within online education, focusing on undergraduate experiences and factors affecting the level of their engagement. The qualitative study employed a phenomenological design. A total of 12 participants, who were studying in an online format across different universities in Kazakhstan were recruited. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview findings revealed that student attitude referred to as emotional engagement consists of negative or positive experiences directly affecting the level of student engagement and motivation of the students. Additionally, the study revealed that varied types of meaningful interactions such as student-student and faculty-student play a significant role in student engagement and their ability to retain information for a longer period of time. The findings also indicated that despite online learning being considered primarily as a change of study mode it has a direct impact on the level of student engagement which in turn is affected by a number of factors related to the digital learning environment and personal perceptions of the learner. Aside from that, emerging from respondents' perspectives, raising digital literacy among faculty members plays a crucial role in enhancing student engagement as well.

Keywords: student engagement, online learning, undergraduate students, Kazakhstan

Аңдатпа

Университет студенттерінің онлайн оқыту және қатысу саласындағы тәжірибесін зерттеу

Студенттердің қатысуы олардың оқу ортасымен байланысын қамтамасыз ететін оқытудың маңызды аспектісі болып табылады. COVID вирусының өршуінен кейін көптеген оқу орындары Қашықтықтан оқытуға көшті, өйткені ол қол жетімділікті, қауіпсіздікті және оқудың ыңғайлылығын қамтамасыз етеді. Оның артықшылықтарына қарамастан, студенттердің e-Learning форматына аз қатысуы немесе қатыспауы сияқты мәселелер бүгінгі күнге дейін өзекті болып қала береді. Бұл жұмыс студенттердің онлайн білім беруге қатысуын зерттейді, студенттердің тәжірибесіне және олардың қатысу деңгейіне әсер ететін факторларға ерекше назар аударады. Бұл сапалы зерттеуде феноменологиялық дизайн қолданылды.

Қазақстанның түрлі университеттерінде онлайн- форматта оқыған барлығы 12 қатысушы жиналды. Деректерді жинау зерттеудің негізгі құралы ретінде жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттарды қамтыды. Сұхбат нәтижелері студенттердің эмоционалды қатысу деп аталатын көзқарасы студенттердің қатысу деңгейі мен мотивациясына тікелей әсер ететін жағымсыз немесе жағымды тәжірибелерден тұратынын көрсетті. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу студент-Студент, Оқытушы-студент сияқты мағыналы өзара әрекеттесудің әртүрлі түрлері студенттердің қатысуында және олардың ақпаратты ұзақ уақыт бойы сақтау қабілетінде маңызды рөл атқаратынын көрсетті. Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, онлайн оқыту ең алдымен оқу режимін өзгерту ретінде қарастырылғанымен, ол студенттердің қатысу деңгейіне тікелей әсер етеді, бұл өз кезегінде цифрлық оқу ортасына және оқушының жеке қабылдауына байланысты бірқатар факторларға байланысты. Сонымен қатар, респонденттердің пікірінше, оқытушылардың цифрлық сауаттылық деңгейін арттыру студенттердің белсенділігін арттыруда маңызды рөл атқарады.

Түйін сөздер: студенттердің белсенділігі, онлайн оқыту, бакалавриат студенттері, Қазақстан

Аннотация

Исследование опыта студентов университета в области онлайн-обучения и вовлеченности

Вовлеченность студентов - важный аспект обучения, обеспечивающий их связь с учебной средой. После вспышки вируса COVID многие учебные заведения перешли на дистанционное обучение, поскольку оно обеспечивает доступность, безопасность и удобство обучения. Несмотря на его преимущества, такие проблемы, как низкая вовлеченность или невовлеченность студентов в формат электронного обучения, остаются актуальными и по сей день. В данной работе исследуется вовлеченность студентов в онлайн-образование, особое внимание уделяется опыту студентов и факторам, влияющим на уровень их вовлеченности. В данном качественном исследовании использован феноменологический дизайн. В общей сложности было набрано 12 участников, которые обучались в онлайн-формате в разных университетах Казахстана. Сбор данных включал полуструктурированные интервью в качестве основного инструмента исследования. Результаты интервью показали, что отношение студентов, называемое эмоциональной вовлеченностью, состоит из негативного или позитивного опыта, непосредственно влияющего на уровень вовлеченности и мотивации студентов. Кроме того, исследование показало, что различные типы значимого взаимодействия, такие как студент-студент, преподаватель-студент, играют важную роль в вовлеченности студентов и их способности удерживать информацию в течение более длительного периода времени. Результаты исследования показали, что, несмотря на то, что онлайн-обучение рассматривается в первую очередь как смена режима обучения, оно оказывает непосредственное влияние на уровень вовлеченности студентов, который,

в свою очередь, зависит от ряда факторов, связанных с цифровой учебной средой и личным восприятием ученика. Кроме того, по мнению респондентов, повышение уровня цифровой грамотности преподавателей также играет важную роль в повышении вовлеченности студентов.

Ключевые слова: вовлеченность студентов, онлайн-обучение, студенты бакалавриата, Казахстан

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| Author Agreement | ii |
| Declaration | iii |
| Ethical Approval | iv |
| CITI Training Certificate | v |
| Acknowledgments | vi |
| Abstract | vii |
| Аңдатпа | viii |
| Аннотация | ix |
| List of Tables | xiii |
| Chapter 1 | 1 |
| Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Introduction | 1 |
| 1.2 Background to the Study | 1 |
| 1.3 Research Problem..... | 3 |
| 1.4 Research Purpose and Questions | 3 |
| 1.5 Significance of the Study..... | 4 |
| Chapter 2 | 6 |
| Literature Review | 6 |
| 2.2.3 <i>Behavioral Engagement</i> | 7 |
| 2.2.4 <i>Collaborative Engagement</i> | 8 |
| 2.3 Collaborative Learning | 8 |
| 2.4 Student Faculty Interactions | 9 |
| 2.5 Challenges of e-Learning..... | 10 |
| 2.6 Importance of Key Skills on Online learning | 11 |
| 2.7 Work Life Balance | 13 |
| 2.8 Summary..... | 14 |
| Chapter 3 | 15 |
| Methodology..... | 15 |
| 3.1 Introduction..... | 15 |
| 3.2 Research Design..... | 15 |
| 3.3 Sampling and Participants | 17 |
| 3.4 Research Instruments | 19 |
| 3.6 Ethical Considerations..... | 21 |
| Chapter 4 | 25 |
| Findings..... | 25 |

| | |
|---|----|
| 4.1 Introduction..... | 25 |
| 4.2 Background Information about Participants | 26 |
| Chapter 5 | 46 |
| Discussion | 46 |
| 5.1 Introduction..... | 46 |
| 5.2 Student Perceptions of Online Learning Experiences | 46 |
| 5.2.1 Positive Attitude | 47 |
| 5.2.2 Negative | 48 |
| 5.3 Key Engagement Dimensions Influencing Online Learning Experiences and Their Impact..... | 49 |
| 5.4 Specific Challenges Students Face during Online Learning in Higher Education ... | 51 |
| Chapter 6 | 54 |
| Conclusion..... | 54 |
| 6.3 Limitations and Recommendations | 55 |
| References | 57 |
| Appendix A: Completed AI Declaration Form | 61 |
| Appendix B..... | 62 |
| Appendix C..... | 71 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 1 Participants' Background Information..... | 19 |
| Table 2 Themes and Subthemes | 25 |

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The first chapter includes the background of the study, which represents the progress of the central phenomenon of the research and the possible impact area. After that, the problem statement section presents the research problem. Additionally, the main aim of the current study is stated, followed by the three research questions that will guide the study. The significance of the study section will talk about possible implications and highlight the benefits of the research.

1.2 Background to the Study

During the 2019-COVID outbreak, the majority of universities had to deal with a dramatic shift from traditional on-campus teaching to online format. A couple weeks after the coronavirus outbreak, more than 95% of the university courses were delivered remotely. According to the National Center for Education Statistics of Kazakhstan in the fall of 2019, just 2.4 million students were undertaking their academic programs in a digital format. Once the Coronavirus pandemic began, the statistics increased nearly by 200% to a total of 7 million students. Therefore, Hodges et al. (2020) stated that COVID-19 teaching should be given an acronym ERT which stands for “emergency remote teaching” because it had little to do with well-organized and thoroughly prepared online courses. Apart from tertiary education, the rapid growth of distance courses could be traced on a variety of digital platforms that were available worldwide. For example, between October 1, 2020, and September 30, 2021, Kazakhstan experienced a significant 54% growth in new registered online learners, reaching a total of 323,000 learners

(Coursera Impact Report, 2021). These data highlight Kazakhstan as one of the emerging economies with the highest rate of new learner growth.

Even though the epidemiological situation has significantly improved, online learning is transforming into an ever more available option because it provides new learning opportunities, greater flexibility, and accessibility for a wide range of learners, and more students are enrolling into online learning. In 2022, 220 million learners subscribed to at least one massive open online course (Dhawal, 2021). That's a considerable increase from the 40 million who attended online courses in 2021.

Furthermore, in accordance with the Law, extramural studies in Kazakhstan were shut down from January 1, 2019 (eGov.kz, 2023). Extramural studies are educational programs offered by universities or colleges that are conducted outside the traditional campus setting. The reason for this decision was the insufficient quality of knowledge that graduates receive after graduating from a higher educational institution. According to *Tengrinews.kz* (2018), part-time students mastered about 65% of the material provided, unlike the 100% that full-time students receive. Thus, the main alternative presented to the correspondence course in universities was online learning. Currently, distance learning is available in all the universities in Kazakhstan (Electronic government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). The regulations for higher institutions providing online learning and the requirements for conducting e-learning educational processes were regulated by the Order of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023).

According to the new regulations presented in 2023 in Kazakhstan, one-fifth of all the courses in the following areas can be taught online: pedagogy, law, choreography, creative arts, aviation and technologies, construction, marine technology, medicine, military affairs, veterinary science. Whereas in other educational fields, half of disciplines

can be taught online. The extent to which courses are taught online differs from one university to another therefore it is important to consider that each institution has its own peculiarities when it comes to offering online courses to students.

1.3 Research Problem

The post-COVID era has opened more opportunities for students to participate in remote learning yet issues regarding student engagement are still relevant up to this day. Notably, research on massive open online courses (MOOCs) shows that participation in online learning falls drastically after courses start (Perna et al., 2014). Therefore, problems such as low students' engagement or disengagement with the course materials and struggle to make conscious effort and allocate time to study while remote studies remain relevant. Apart from that, when we talk about student engagement the problem occurring in online and in-person learning differs. Hollister et al. (2022) mentioned that prior to the COVID-2019 during face-to-face courses the main challenges for learners was content; whereas when learning changed its mode to online, students' primary difficulty was getting engaged in studies. Poor attendance and low student involvement in online classes is a concerning topic in the Kazakhstani higher educational system because it negatively affects academic performance and has an impact on motivation among students. Low academic performance can result in poor material acquisition and an ineffective educational environment negatively affecting students' perception of learning in general. Despite this, the impact of different factors on university student engagement, along with students' experiences have not been fully investigated in Kazakhstan.

1.4 Research Purpose and Questions

The main purpose of this study is to explore student engagement within online education provided by a university, focusing specifically on their experiences as remote learners. Additionally, the research investigated the prevailing factors affecting student

involvement in distance learning in Kazakhstan universities. It recommends effective engagement strategies in online classes to increase student involvement in online learning.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are students' perceptions of online learning?
2. Which of the five engagement dimensions (emotional, behavioral, cognitive, social, collaborative) significantly impact online learning experiences and why?
3. What are the main challenges students face during online learning in higher education?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Student engagement in a remote learning context is described here as “the student’s psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote” (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p. 12), and is important for several reasons.

First, this study covered different experiences by incorporating more diverse samples of students from four universities to gain a more holistic view on university students’ experiences in diverse educational institutions in Kazakhstan. In the revised literature, most studies have frequently mentioned the limitation in the form of gaining data from a single university which affected data versatility. That is why this study is significant in terms of looking at the experiences of student engagement from multiple sources.

Second, it is essential to understand whether online student involvement has a potential impact on improving e-learning quality in universities and possible changes can be made in tertiary education policies over time. Previously, the decision of abolishing extramural studies was made to improve the quality of higher education based on the data

from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, indicating low performance of students of extramural courses compared to full-time students.

Nevertheless, this research focuses on a presented alternative to extramural courses which is online learning based on full-time education and is implementing a part time system (Electronic government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). Based on the findings from this research, university administration as well as the faculty members can be enabled to revise the efficiency of this mode of study and consider making further interventions that suit them better.

Thirdly, researchers in the area of online learning have often implemented quantitative data collection and analysis as an opportunity to have versatile, extensive and statistical data which can be generalizable but their findings have not reflected upon in-depth and unique exploration of experiences. Therefore, current research took an attempt to take a comprehensive look at experiences of online student engagement to understand its impact on their engagement using a qualitative approach.

1.6 Summary

In summary, the introductory chapter highlighted the rise of online learning and its further development in Kazakhstani tertiary education. It also presented the importance of exploring university students' experiences of online learning as low student involvement is a concerning topic in the Kazakhstani higher educational system because it negatively affects academic performance and motivation among students. By investigating factors affecting students' engagement possible changes can be made in educational area.

Subsequent chapters will further explore various aspects of this research. The next chapter reviews the literature on online learning.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter covers essential frameworks and theories that focus on student engagement. It is also worth noting that the sudden transition, which in fact was not possible to be prepared for, has disrupted educational context and had its drastic impact on learners in the first place. As Almahasees et al. (2021a) states global pandemic had imposed the alteration to distance learning, but surely there were institutions in some countries that were not fully equipped to teach online effectively. Throughout the period since the concept of student engagement was first formed, it has undergone several transformational changes, evolving from a two-dimensional framework to one that currently encompasses up to five dimensions. This expansion reflects a growing understanding of the complex nature of engagement, incorporating engagement dimensions such as emotional, behavioral, and cognitive, which provide a broader perspective of how students interact with their learning environments.

The literature review chapter will explore the conceptual framework employed to understand the concept of online student engagement from both the instructors' and students' perspectives in Kazakhstani and worldwide contexts. Moreover, the sections represent key patterns emerging from reviewed literature related to student involvement and factors affecting it.

2.2. Conceptual Framework

Redmond et al. (2018) present Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education which aims to give a more complete picture of student engagement in online learning by identifying key elements and indicators that facilitate effective online learning. The framework consists of social engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioral

engagement, collaborative engagement, and emotional engagement. These aspects are essential for efficient student engagement in online learning and teaching.

2.2.1 Social Engagement

Social engagement relates to “students’ social investment in the collegiate experience” (Knight, 2013, p. 73). It consists of active engagement in academic and extracurricular activities that take place in real life, such as social gathering (Coates, 2006). Social engagement is crucial when students are assigned to collaborate with group mates for a project or work on tasks and it is linked to social engagement (Sinha et al. 2025). It includes developing relationships with groupmates and faculty members beyond the classroom.

2.2.2 Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement is considered as the productive act of learning and studying. Bowen (2005) explained that this type of engagement is crucial part of engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) explained cognitive engagement as learner involved in the learning process to “comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills” (p. 60). In the literature, it is often connected with motivation, values and beliefs, self-regulation, and strategy use and effort (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Greene, 2015).

2.2.3 Behavioral Engagement

In their research on engagement, Fredricks et al. (2004) identified three dimensions of behavioral engagement. First, diligent behaviors such as obeying rules, asking questions, participating in discussions, and paying attention; second, active involvement in educational activities; and third, taking part in out of class activities while being in the educational institution. From a behaviorist point, high student engagement indicators follow procedures and expectations, that is “doing the work and following the rules” (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 65).

2.2.4 Collaborative Engagement

Collaborative engagement relates to the improvement of meaningful connections as well as networks which facilitate the educational process, taking into account working with groupmates, faculty, industry, and the institution. To simplify, collaborative learning means students working together to achieve common learning goals (Cain et al., 2021). The essence of social and emotional engagement shows that socializing is beneficial from all kinds of perspectives including academic, social, and emotional sides.

2.2.5 Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement is attributed to learners' emotional response and attitude to the learning process. The affective or emotional component of engagement is closely tied with a student's feelings and dispositions towards learning. Sinatra et.al (2015) reported that "both negative and positive emotions can facilitate activation of attention and engagement" (p. 2)

2.3 Collaborative Learning

Cole et al. (2019) state that student engagement might be dependent on communications and perhaps focus on interacting with other online peers compared to the professor. Moreover, students that are taking more online courses were more often engaged in quantitative reasoning. Yet, they were less likely to have an opportunity to participate in collaborative learning and discussions with others, in comparison to their face-to-face classroom counterparts.

In addition, Namyssova et al. (2019) indicates that while having online sessions students did not have an opportunity to have a discussion about their projects with their peers, which meant that there was "isolation" of students from group mates during this important stage of the course. Moreover, Rajan et al. (2024) indicated that since

universities adopt advanced technology in teaching while at the same time switching back to in-person learning, student feelings of desocialization and disengagement remain visible to faculty. The students shared that methods needed to be created that would enable for more remote peer communication and idea exchange process during project plan development and implementation.

Moreover, the main psychosocial impact made on student engagement was identified from communicating with the groupmates, which fostered positive emotions and experiences of support and belonging (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Therefore, students considered the communities and network they created to be very important throughout the academic year. Salmela-Aro et al. (2022) claims that active involvement in learning process increased the likelihood of becoming friends; this, in turn, reinforced the level of being engaged in studying. Finally, when students engage with each other, a cooperative environment can be constructed, which in turn leads to a greater opinion expression for students overall (Trowler, 2010).

2.4 Student Faculty Interactions

Several studies showed the significance of student teacher communication as well as interaction between students and teachers in virtual learning context which corresponds with social constructivist perspectives, emphasizing the essential power of interaction for deep knowledge acquisition (Dixson, 2015). Additionally, Hollister et al.'s (2022) study suggests how faculty members can better support students' learning engagement by more regularly applying engagement techniques, including as polls and chat features. Although faculty's physical presence during online learning is not possible it is stated that students' motivation levels are higher when faculty members are more approachable including during out of class sessions. It is important to note that factors like communication and

involvement happened to be key to the developing and sustaining a learning society (Lucas & Vincente 2023).

Su et al. (2024) highlights that communication between students and teachers online is a crucial factor for achieving successful academic results. Meaningful feedback received from faculty members is also considered equally important since it can enhance better learning and higher motivation among students (Boling et al. 2012). Consequently, due to the non-appearance of in-person interaction like eye contact, facial expressions and body language, both groups of respondents had a consensus regarding students' challenging experience of maintaining their attention span and as a result they had difficulty remaining active in online classes. Furthermore, the support provided by teachers is essential in online learning, as faculty engagement and strong connections contribute to higher student retention rates (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Multiple researchers have highlighted those effective online instructors support students by providing timely feedback, which helps to establish their personal presence and engages learners via both synchronous and asynchronous methods (Rose Sr., 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Finally, Huang et al. (2023) study suggests that factors such as external social support is effective in terms of reducing student learning burnout, which support the idea that educators should make every effort to promote the quantity and quality of social support and support interaction between students.

2.5 Challenges of e-Learning

Several studies have highlighted the main barriers and challenges occurring in an online format. Yu (2022) found that students who did not obtain any digital support during their studies used to have negative attitudes towards distance learning as well as have low academic performance. Furthermore, Al-Maskari et al. (2021) has noted that when compared to traditional classroom teaching, online learning lacks personal presence and as

a result creates a gap between teacher and learner. Likewise, the quantitative study on university students' challenges to distance learning during the COVID 2019 revealed that among most frequently mentioned barriers were technical, instructor and communicational issues. Additionally, online learning has been reported to make it challenging for learners to stay active and involved into their studies, creating more challenging environments to study consistently and effectively (Rajan et al., 2024, as cited in Chiu, 2021). Furthermore, the high level of uncertainty was justified by the high demands of the learning program in addition to the real life obligations, as well as time constraints (Zembylas et al., 2008). Additionally, one female participant mentioned that "The workload, the time demanded, and the level of difficulty present in distance learning, are a major concern and constitute the main factors that cause me a lot of anxiety".

2.6 Importance of Key Skills on Online learning

In current literature "student engagement" is considered as an umbrella term and has a variety of definitions attributed to it. Yet, Kuh's work builds a foundation for modern-day notions, describing student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). Coates (2007) emphasizes that "an independent style of engagement is characterized by a more academically and less socially orientated approach to study. Students reporting an independent style of study see themselves as participants in a supportive learning community" (pp. 133-134). Along with descriptions of student engagement various scholars listed a number of skills that are vital to possess and develop while being engaged in a distance learning. These include time management, autonomous learning ability, self-regulated learning (Guo et al., 2024; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Su et al., 2024). Interestingly, according to Pellas (2014, as cited in Belhaj et al., 2020), students' self-

regulation in online courses is directly correlated with their emotional and cognitive engagement.

Farrell and Brunton (2020) pointed out that student involvement is influenced by several interconnected psychosocial factors, including teacher's support, motivation, skills and self-efficacy. The research showed that improving time management and organizational aspects were essential skills for online student academic progress and engagement, which gave learners an opportunity to balance the life load and study. Moreover, enhanced time management abilities increase the likelihood of learners' effective course completion (Holder, 2007). This suggests that strong time management skills positively impact on part-time students' success rates, enabling them to handle their work, family, personal, and academic responsibilities more diligently (Janib et al., 2021). Also, Guo et al. (2024) mentioned that first year students are usually not aware of their creative abilities, and this can cause them to simply absorb the knowledge without applying it, and their independent learning ability and student participation during classes is much less intense than that of senior students. Moreover, Sunday et.al (2021) while exploring the effects of online learning on retention ability in higher education found that the knowledge retention had a significant drop due to high levels of uncertainty. Therefore, adaptability plays an important role as a skill to be successful in online learning.

Additionally, apart from skills that are specifically important for learners to possess Getenet et al. (2024) emphasized the need of integrating digital technologies and having high levels of digital literacy to foster efficient and engaging learning experiences in the digital environment. It shows that aside from being active teachers should also be able to integrate technology into their teaching practices, as noted by Hsu and Lin (2020), Lim (2023), and Prior et al. (2016).

On the whole, according to the literature, a range of interconnected factors affect online student experiences: time management abilities, balancing study with work as well as family commitments, autonomy, belonging and community, motivation, course structure and finally support provided by higher educational institutions, programs, and instructors (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Brown et al., 2015; Buck, 2016; Holder, 2007; Zembylas, Theodorou, & Pavlakis, 2008).

2.7 Work Life Balance

A few studies identified that students enrolling online learning tend to be older than their face-to-face counterparts. Serdyukov and Serdyukova (2006) stated the percentage of older adults in graduate and postgraduate educational programs is much higher. Therefore, their research demonstrates that one of the most important factors in older adult learning is convenience. In addition, apart from their studies they tend to have more family and work commitments which can be challenging to balance at the same time. The findings from Farrell and Brunton's (2020) study indicates that being a successful online student was impacted by the structural influence of life load. As a result, life obligations may have a significant impact on the levels of student engagement because it may interfere with learners' academic obligations.

The most significant challenge for online learnings was found to be balancing their studies with other highly important and time-taking commitments, such as work, family and caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, according to the study conducted by Chang et al. (2021) where he compared online learning to physical classroom respondents reported had a belief that online classes were superior in terms of efficiency, time allocation, course content sharing and overall were more convenient for them. Some students suggested that flipped classrooms were more suitable for specific courses to be able to rewatch and study.

2.8 Summary

This literature review has thoroughly addressed the Online Engagement Framework consisting of social, cognitive, behavioral, collaborative, and emotional engagement, as well as the main themes that emerged from analyzing existing literature on this topic. It highlights different types of interactions, specific learning skills, the ability to maintain a work-life balance, and collaborative learning as essential drivers in accelerating student motivation and engagement toward the successful pursuit of their studies. Furthermore, the review emphasizes the interconnectedness of these factors and their cumulative impact on student success in online education. Recognizing and fostering these dimensions is crucial for educators and institutions aiming to enhance the quality and effectiveness of online learning environments.

The reviewed research also emphasizes the significance of effectively distributing time since learners in online programs are generally older than their peers in traditional, on campus classes therefore have more commitments. Notably, while time management is considered one of the highly valuable skills, other skills such as autonomous learning ability, self-regulated learning also play a crucial role in this context. When it comes to interaction various studies have different findings where some of them highlight importance of student-faculty interaction while others emphasize the positive impact of peer interaction on online student engagement. However, it remains evident that the communication plays a crucial role in contributing to student engagement levels. The methodology of this study is examined in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology used to explore student engagement in an online education provided by a university, focusing on their experiences as distance learners. The study's research questions were:

1. What are students' perceptions of online learning?
2. Which of the five engagement dimensions (emotional, behavioral, cognitive, social, collaborative) significantly impact online learning experiences and why?
3. What are the challenges students face during online learning in tertiary education?

The chapter addresses the research design of the study, sampling and participants, research site, data collection instruments and ethical considerations. Each section explicitly justifies the selection of specific methods and instruments.

3.2 Research Design

The aim of this research was to explore university students' experiences of online learning and factors influencing their engagement. Aiming at the exploration of experiences of online learning and specifically focusing on engagement in this context it was important to tackle the issue as it evidently remains not fully discovered in a Kazakhstani educational context. Taking into consideration the nature of the research purpose, a qualitative approach was adopted for this research. Qualitative research focuses on understanding people's interpretation of their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As noted by Gay and Airasian (2000), a qualitative method is defined as "the collection of extensive data on many variables over an extended period of time, in a naturalistic setting, in order to gain insights not possible using other types of research" (p. 627).

A phenomenological study design was used to explore the experiences of online higher education students in Kazakhstan. This approach was chosen because it refers to “describing the lived experiences of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 111). In this research, the central phenomenon is “student engagement” and refers to the “student’s willingness to invest their own cognitive, emotional and behavioral effort to interact with resources related to their education experience” (Conduit et al., 2016, p. 231). This research design is appropriate for current research because it covers individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon of engagement, and the study focused on exploring their lived experiences of online learning. This way the main aim of the research was developing a central description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals. This description contains an explanation of “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

The main objective of phenomenological study is to distill individual experiences with a phenomenon into a description of the universal essence (a “grasp of the very nature of the thing,” van Manen, 1990, p. 177). Similarly, Creswell (2013) explains that “phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.” (p. 139) Therefore, by adapting this design, this study intended to find commonalities among the experiences of university students in online learning.

Although a case study was also considered to be implemented, it was decided that it was less appropriate for this study because Creswell (2013) highlights that in “a case study, a specific case is examined, often with the intent of examining an issue with the case illustrating the complexity of the issue”. Thus, despite case study being often useful in

providing valuable information into individual experiences or phenomena, they often lack the broad, exploratory scope features of phenomenological research.

Therefore, because the focus is on exploring the experiences of online higher education students and understanding the underlying factors influencing their engagement, a phenomenological qualitative study design is more relevant for fulfilling the goals of the current research topic. The goal of phenomenological study is to capture the subjective reality of experiences as they are lived and felt by the person. As a result, it can uniquely capture the essence of each individual case of relived experience and contribute to knowledge formation.

3.3 Sampling and Participants

The current study recruited 10 participants, who are undergraduate students from 4 universities across Kazakhstan. In terms of the number of participants, Polkinghorne (1989) recommends conducting interviews with 5 to 25 people specifically for phenomenological study. As current research is phenomenological, it was important to directly engage and communicate with participants in order to gain in depth and practical insights of their unique experiences. As the research aimed to explore student engagement in online learning, all participants were students who had experienced online learning in higher educational institutions. In addition to that, previously gender imbalance was mentioned as a limitation in the number of studies in reviewed literature. Thus, a heterogeneous group was recruited for this study. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (2007) a heterogeneous refers to the group of individuals which represent a variety of backgrounds, such as experiences and backgrounds to ensure a range of quality data.

The participants were studying in four different higher educational organizations, including private and autonomous and their majors differed. The reason for choosing a varied research site was to capture a variety of cases and provide a comprehensive

description of multiple viewpoints on student engagement in online learning. However, as Creswell (2013) suggests, “the more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes, and the overall essence of the experience for all participants” (p. 122). Therefore, choosing different research sites can result in challenges in gaining shared experiences and finding commonalities. This issue was addressed by thoroughly choosing participants who provided rich, relevant data related to the phenomenon being studied.

Following the above observations, the study participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. Creswell (2013) states that “the concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research, meaning that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 206). Therefore, a purposeful sample that was strategically used to recruit participants.

Maximum variation and criterion sampling were also employed. According to Creswell (2018), “criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon,” whereas “maximum variation documents diverse variations of individuals or sites based on specific characteristics.” In this study, criterion sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience with online learning, ensuring the relevance of their perspectives, while maximum variation sampling allowed capturing a wide range of experiences across different backgrounds, academic programs, and levels of study. This combination helped to enrich the findings by providing both depth and diversity of viewpoints related to the phenomenon under investigation.

This initial approach is often selected because “when a researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives—an ideal in qualitative research” (Creswell,

2013). Additionally, the criterion sampling is relevant when all the studied participants represent people who have experienced the shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 155).

It is important to note that students were able to provide firsthand experiences with online learning, the challenges they underwent during distance education, and their satisfaction with the online learning environment.

Table 1

Participants' Background Information

| Participant | Sex | Major | Employed | University Type |
|-------------|--------|---------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Malika | female | Finance | Yes, did not specify | Private |
| Asel | female | Chemistry/Biology, Pedagogy | No | Private |
| Aida | female | Restaurant and Hotel Management | Yes, did not specify | Private |
| Temirlan | male | Economics | Tutor | Autonomous |
| Barak | male | Mathematics | Tutor | Private |
| Aizhan | female | Economics | Tutor | Autonomous |
| Kuralai | female | Biological Sciences | Manager | Autonomous |
| Medet | male | Computer Science | Tutor | Autonomous |
| Aisulu | female | World Languages and Literature | Tutor | Autonomous |
| Nazym | female | Two Foreign Languages, Pedagogy | Tutor | Private |

3.4 Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews are the most suitable instrument for providing rich data, and they are conducted one-on-one with permission to record them for transcribing. A

common description of the essence of the experience of “online student engagement” for all individuals was developed by conducting semi-structured interviews with several participants. Creswell (2013) states that “data collection in phenomenological studies consists of in-depth and multiple interviews with participants”. As this research aimed at gathering information from multiple higher education institutions the interviews were conducted in virtual format due to its flexibility and convenience. Participants were recruited across four universities and different online platforms ensuring security such as Zoom; Microsoft Teams and Webex were to be used as the main tools for collecting the data. Additionally, participants had an opportunity to join interviews from their preferred locations which was more convenient, in time and budget saving both for them and the researcher. As interviews were conducted online good rapport with participants was established to obtain high quality data and openly talk about their experiences. Moreover, online data gathering can present itself from a positive side in terms of having flexibility by collecting data from people with different backgrounds and educational institutions.

Although, there was no need to access a permission from a “gatekeeper” to enter the site other possible barriers such as poor internet connection, time management, willingness of participants to devote their time to participate in the research were indicated and foreseen prior to data collection.

In addition, Creswell (2013) mentions that conducting phenomenological interviews demands that researchers possess patience and expertise when posing relevant questions and guiding respondents to explore the meaning of their experiences. The purpose of the study was also revealed to the participants. However, there was a risk that participants might not be comfortable enough to share their experiences therefore in the beginning of each interview approximately five minutes were spent to build a good

rapport, provide information about the research and provide a welcoming attitude through virtual interviews.

3.5 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was utilized in the analysis of the interviews. The interview transcripts were thoroughly analyzed and printed. Finally, the analysis results were compared and discussed. Furthermore, it followed the six steps of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the gathered data was overviewed, and the necessary notes were taken. After that, similarities were highlighted and were coded. Codes were thematized. The themes were reviewed in order to ensure to what extent they were associated with the three research questions of the current study. Then, each of the themes was divided to understand the data. Finally, the analysis of the data was written based on research questions and aims into columns.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a fundamental part of the entire research process and must be maintained at every stage (Cohen et al., 2017). They are especially important when gaining access to participants and obtaining their informed consent to take part in the study. Since this research involved human subjects, the researcher completed the NUGSE Ethics approval process. Only after receiving formal approval from the Graduate School of Education Research Ethics Committee did the data collection phase begin. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and research questions of the study, the methodology used, and the procedures in place to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. This transparency aimed to protect participants' rights and maintain ethical standards throughout the research. Following these principles helped ensure that the study was conducted responsibly, respecting both institutional guidelines and the trust placed in the researcher by those who participated.

3.6.1 Informed Consent

Furthermore, each participant was acquainted with informed consent, which refers to the procedures for potential participants whether or not to take part in the research once the researcher tells them what it is about and what the process requires (Creswell, 2009). In addition, at the beginning of the interview the participant verbally read the elements and verbally agreed to participate. The research started with the process of informed consent with an invitation or recruitment letter. All the participants received a recruitment letter via their emails.

The study began with establishing initial contact with the site and potential individuals. It was crucial to explain the purpose of the research to the participants, which was outlined in an informed consent form. Participants were made aware of the general nature of the research prior to the start of data collection. Voluntary participation in the research was indicated in informed consent form and confirmed that the research does not put the participant in any under form of risk.

For the current study, information was gathered from students by obtaining their agreement to take part in the study. Respondents were aware of the selection reason, remained anonymous in case they desired, and informed about the purpose of the study. This disclosure helped to build trusting rapport among the participating members.

Creswell (2013) also highlighted specific principles regarding keeping the data and its protection that are fit into qualitative research, such as creating backup copies of computer files, employing high-quality tapes for recording interviews, and ensuring tape compatibility the transcriber's machine. Moreover, Hammersley and Traianou (2012) suggest that if anonymity and confidentiality is not guaranteed, then it should not be mentioned (p. 129). Additionally, I created a comprehensive list that categorized all the kinds of data, protecting the confidentiality of participants by assigning different indicators

to their names in the data, and designing a data collection matrix as a visual tool of locating and finding information for research (Davidson, 1996).

3.6.2 Anonymity

The main idea of anonymity is to ensure that gathered information should not reveal the participant's identity in any way. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992) mentioned several strategies for ensuring anonymity, such as the use of aliases and pseudonyms, assigning codes to participants, and securing data through password-protected files. To uphold these standards, this research used codes to refer to participants instead of using their real names. Each participant was assigned a unique identifier that was used consistently throughout the research documents and data analysis. Additionally, all files containing participant information were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. No personal information, such as names or contact details, was included in the final dataset used for analysis. These steps were crucial for protecting participants' identities and ensuring that even if data were somehow accessed, it would not be possible to link responses to specific individuals. Maintaining anonymity also helped to create a safer environment for participants, encouraging them to share their honest experiences without fear of exposure or negative consequences.

3.6.3 Confidentiality

Another important step in ethical considerations is to grant confidentiality to participants by not revealing information that may possibly lead to the disclosure of their identity (Cohen et al., 2017). In this study, confidentiality was maintained through the removal of any possible identifiers from the collected data. Information such as participants' names, addresses, phone numbers, institution names, job titles, and any other personal or organizational identifiers were carefully omitted from transcripts and other research materials. Participants were informed about these procedures beforehand to

ensure transparency and to reassure them that their privacy would be protected at every stage. Additionally, another layer of confidentiality was achieved by restricting access to the data. Only the researcher directly involved in the project had access to the raw data files, and no information was shared with third parties or external organizations. Data sharing was avoided even within the academic environment unless explicitly required and ethically approved. All discussions related to the data took place within secured, controlled settings to prevent unintended breaches of confidentiality.

By implementing these measures, the research aimed to foster trust between the researcher and participants and to uphold the ethical standards necessary for conducting responsible and credible qualitative research.

3.7 Summary

To sum up, the research study employed qualitative phenomenological study in order to make an in-depth exploration of students' experiences of online learning and engagement. The purposeful sampling was used to strategically recruit participants who will be able to inform research questions and phenomenon that was being researched. The chapter justified the reasons behind selecting research design, research instruments, sampling methods and data analysis of collected data. It also outlined the procedures for data collection, highlighting the procedures taken to ensure that all the elements of ethical considerations such as informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality are properly considered and followed. In the next chapter, the results of this study are presented.

Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of students' engagement in online learning in the context of Kazakhstan. More specifically, the study investigated the prevailing factors affecting student engagement in online learning in Kazakhstan universities and aims to figure out what kind of challenges students have towards online learning along with their actual engagement in this process. These major research questions guided the study:

- 1) What are students' perceptions of online learning?
- 2) Which of the five engagement dimensions (emotional, behavioral, cognitive) significantly impact online learning experiences and why?
- 3) What are the specific challenges students face during online learning in higher education?

As for the data collection tool, semi-structured online interviews were employed in this research, and findings are presented based on three research questions. Four major themes have been identified as follows: 1) Students Perceptions of Online Learning 2) Different Dimensions of Student Engagement in Online Learning and 3) Challenges Students Faced during Online Learning and 4) Suggestions and Recommendations based on students' experiences.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

| Main Theme | Subtheme |
|---|----------|
| Students Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Online Learning | Positive |
| | Negative |

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Dimensions of Student Engagement in Online Learning | Cognitive Engagement |
| | Behavioral Engagement |
| | Collaborative Engagement |
| | Social Engagement |

| | |
|---|-----------------------|
| Challenges Students Faced during Online Learning | Technical Barriers |
| | Communication Issues |
| | Lack of motivation |
| | Emotional Issues |
| | Faculty Accessibility |

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Suggestions and Recommendations | Practical Knowledge |
| | Physical Activities |

Note. Themes and Subthemes emerged from thematic analysis of the interviews.

4.2 Background Information about Participants

The participants of the current study have a mix of humanitarian and technical major backgrounds. The majors included 2 economics, finance, restaurant and hotel management, biological sciences, 3 pedagogical specialties in different fields such as mathematics, biology/chemistry, English and finally computer science and literature. Students were studying online between the years 2020 and 2022, the COVID period. All of them completed their courses during these 2 years and have obtained bachelor's degrees. Majority of participants were aged between 19-21 and one male of 24 years obtaining a second bachelor's degree. A total of 3 male and 7 female respondents were invited and

participated in a semi structured interview. None of the participants were married or had children yet most of them had either part-time or full-time online jobs. Precisely, 9 out of 10 mentioned having an experience of working during period of online learning. From that, 6 out of 9 were working as tutors remotely. One student worked in the startup sphere, two did not specify. All were attending higher education institutions and originally started in a traditional offline learning setting but later switched to emergency remote teaching (ERT) due to COVID regulations. As a result, courses were not initially designed to fit into online learning.

4.3 Students Perceptions of Online Learning.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has had a significant impact both on teachers and students, especially those who started their learning offline and eventually were forced to accept a different mode of study. While describing their attitudes towards online learning, participants had a mixture of positive and negative experiences while reflecting on their personal experiences.

4.3.1 Positive Experiences and Advantages

Many students mentioned being able to balance work and study had benefited them in an online format. “For those [working] students, the remote format is very convenient from that perspective” (Asel). “I started working part-time, and I thought I needed to organize my life” (Aisulu). Temirlan also highlighted that “From October 2020 until the end of the online learning period, I worked as a teacher. So I can say that transitioning to online learning allowed me to earn money, which was a huge advantage. These sentiments highlight the flexibility that online learning had to offer to participants. Nonetheless others found working and studying at the same time very challenging and tiring. For example,

I worked 10 hours a day, six days a week. It gave me motivation—I became financially independent from my parents. However, the combination of studying and working took a toll on my mental health. I went through severe depressive episodes and was later diagnosed with seasonal affective disorder due to the lack of sunlight during the Astana winters. (Kuralai)

Building on this idea some participants also benefited from their situation academically and as a result had a positive attitude towards online learning “I could get up at a convenient time and start learning at my own pace, in a comfortable format and atmosphere. If I didn’t understand something, I could immediately rewind and review it. Overall, I appreciated it a lot” (Medet). According to Aizhan “I can say that my online learning experience was really good, because I had time for my initial academic main responsibilities, I also had time for different additional courses.”

Additionally, interviews also mentioned that being around parents is great and not having to worry about things like food made their life easier while being a student. Therefore, those who were staying in their hometown with families felt relaxed and calm. Other advantages were the convenience of revisiting and revising the materials of the courses.

Finally, those participants who worked at that time could take full advantage of the format to effectively balance work and study. Medet described his experience as “My routine was about the same, in the morning, I worked and completed some tasks, and after lunch, I started studying. Again, these asynchronous lectures were extremely convenient and helpful.”

4.3.2 Negative Experiences

However, despite online learning being convenient for some activities, opposing perspectives have also emerged.

But if you think about university years as the best experience for building new connections and networking, then the remote format is not suitable at all. You don't see your groupmates; you don't see anyone. Online feels constrained, with certain boundaries. (Aida)

A majority of students also expressed a high concern regarding the increased cheating issues, describing it as explicit cheating. They reported that, "The only negative thing was probably related to cheating. Many students cheated, and it was often quite brazen. To address this, they [professors] tried to tighten online exam formats. This format made cheating more difficult" (Medet).

Cheating was pretty common, to be honest. Everyone was doing it. And I think the professors were not ready for this. But there was one case where we had to take exams one-on-one with the teacher and there was no way to cheat. (Barak)

Aisulu has also stated that "usually, cheating is invisible, but here it was obvious. That's why I didn't realize how fair these estimates were." This demonstrates that the strict cheating regulations held by faculty affected not only the students who were cheating but also their counterparts because of exam complexity and fairness of grading.

Finally, students were also asked to describe their confidence level in academic abilities. 4 out of 10 participants mentioned that the knowledge retention received in an online format was noticeably lower and ineffective: "Based on my own experience, the knowledge received online is not retained as effectively as the knowledge gained from offline courses. Honestly, I don't even remember most of the materials I studied in online courses" (Temirlan). "In mathematics, I felt that I had definitely fallen behind. The truth is, even now, no one really remembers the topics we studied" (Barak). Furthermore, Kuralai notes that,

I can say for sure that some of the knowledge is of a low quality. When I came back to campus and we had to have consecutive courses, I didn't remember or I didn't know how to solve, like, simple tasks from my previous courses online.

On the other hand, one respondent expressed a completely opposite opinion to the stated above,

It often happens that I remember something from university and use it directly at work. For example, I recall something we learned online, revisit the course material, and apply it. I know where to find the resources I need. Naturally, I don't remember every detail or topic by heart, but I remember solving specific problems in discrete mathematics. Honestly, I'm not sure I could've handled it all offline, especially the social aspects. I'll explain why—my case is a bit unusual. I started my first year of university at the age of 23. I don't feel like I missed out on anything. (Medet)

The evident discrepancy among experiences as the participant mentioned himself could be due to age difference and the fact that he was obtaining his second bachelor's degree he had no need to directly engage himself in a student life because he had already experienced it and was older. Therefore, first- and second-time students may have different perceptions and interpret the perceived importance of socialization and studies.

4.4 Different Dimensions of Student Engagement in Online Learning

4.4.1 Cognitive Engagement

Several participants indicated that, COVID-19 had a drastic impact that affected the entire world, institutions and all the stakeholders had no choice other than being urgently forced to switch the format of education from face-to-face to online. The following quotes from participants illustrate this view.

When I enrolled in university in September 2019, it wasn't online. Quarantine began in 2020, and only then did I transition to online learning. So, I didn't have online experience when I applied, but I gained it along the way. (Malika)

Similarly, "The issue [of studying online] was that we weren't prepared for the sudden shift" (Temirlan). Barak added,

No one was fully prepared for the situation, so it wasn't really about disadvantages—it was more about the lack of readiness across the board. The only issue, in my opinion, was the lack of adaptability and effort from some teachers.

The transition to online learning was not initially intended, and as a result, it was not strategically planned in advance. Consequently, there was limited motivation from the students' side to fully adjust and engage in the new format.

Talking about the format of education, students had experienced a mix of synchronous and asynchronous studies. Participants reported that the format was highly dependent on the course and instructors. Therefore, in some courses one format could prevail rather than the other. One of the participants recalled,

There were kind of synchronous [lectures], they had to be logged in on time, zoom, and there were no recordings, and so on. But mostly 80% of it was asynchronous.

There were lectures and seminars and recordings that could be viewed later. (Medet)

Furthermore, students have expressed different factors that were influential on their course experiences and motivation to be engaged with their studies and courses.

Several aspects influenced student involvement, such as the course being 'well-structured for online learning,' which made it more memorable. Several students recall the flipped format to be extremely effective for their distance learning. For instance,

In a genetics course, the professor made pre-recorded videos with presentations, explained everything well, and gave ten questions related to the material. We met online weekly, and the professor asked questions randomly. It was useful. In other cases, there were pre-recorded videos, but no motivation to watch them. (Aida)

Lastly, respondents were asked about specific strategies that they employed in order to succeed in online learning. Students said that the ability to quickly learn and adapt was key as they were exposed to different technologies and practices constantly. Examples of the skills noted are time management, discipline, accountability, and communication skills, among others, as evidenced by this student's responses. This reflects the cognitive dimensions found in the literature. For example, "Knowing how to write an email politely to explain your situation was very important. When we worked in groups, communication was essential to complete our projects" (Aida)

Time management helped a lot. But accountability and promises to other people also helped me. If I just promise myself to do something, I might not do it. But if I promise my friends or colleagues, I will definitely do it (Kuralai).

Students also highlighted that the professor's demanding approach had a positive impact on students and motivated them to study.

Yes, I've learned a few skills, especially through a couple of courses from an amazing literature professor. She asked a lot of questions, and it was difficult to keep up, but she demanded discipline. I had a strict daily routine. I had a clear schedule of how many pages of the book I had to read in a day in order to make it by the end of the week. (Aisulu)

On the other hand, some students showed how absence of above-mentioned skills negatively impacted them: "Discipline, honestly, was completely gone. Time management,

too, was practically non-existent. The way we studied was essentially like this: “I’ll prepare for exams a couple of days before, and that’s it” (AseI).

4.4.2 Behavioral Engagement

Others also mentioned that unexpected attendance checks during the class or being informed that they will encounter this material during an exam or midterm helped them to focus better. This indicates that engagement triggers enhanced students’ engagement level in the course. Apart from that, the personal interest towards the course was also essential to get students to study more and put less effort into memorization of the material.

The course included topics like game theory and human behavior, and it was really fascinating. Despite being an asynchronous course, the materials provided were incredibly engaging. The topics themselves were very intriguing. Through interesting video lessons and good real-life examples. You could tell that the professor genuinely wanted us to learn. (Temirlan)

Later on, I still continued studying mathematics, even if it wasn’t obligatory. So for my major, I had to have only one math course. However, I ended up having, like, six of them solving different mathematical problems and studying different formulas.

Applying these formulas was quite interesting. (Aizhan)

4.4.3 Collaborative Engagement

In the same way, collaboration with peers during the course also played an important role because one student reported that it allowed them to “learn their [groupmates’] thoughts and ideas”. Students also highlighted that less overcrowded classes were more practical.

We might be given a project to develop over two weeks, and if it turned out great, it could account for up to 40% of our grade. That was really cool because we had the

space to express ourselves even in the online learning environment. Practical sessions, where we had smaller groups, were much more engaging. (Asel)

We had a peer review during this course – this is when you read the work of other students, evaluate them, give comments and suggest some ideas. It was interesting because you get to know your classmates better. There was the opportunity to investigate their perspectives, to learn their thoughts and ideas. It was fascinating and unusual. In this course, we communicated and interacted more. I think it was the only course that I really enjoyed. (Kuralai)

When it happens that there is a course, and a lot of people are put on this course, and 70 people are sitting there, and it still feels like it. It even happens when projects are protected, it drags on, but for a very long time. (Malika)

Nevertheless, there was some contradictory opinions regarding the efficiency group work as well:

Not engaging in terms of the group because we didn't have much interaction. Like, everybody just took the responsibilities that they need to finish, and that's it. So I wouldn't say that group projects were that much of a part that I liked. (Aizhan)

4.4.4 Social Engagement

Notably, six out ten participants revealed that if course instructors' involvement was low they failed to put significant effort into the course during online learning. The non-engagement of professors could be evident to students from conducting mainly asynchronous format of courses and delivering monotonous lectures: "The lack of structure, engaging content, and meaningful evaluation criteria were the main reasons why I didn't feel the need to participate or put in any significant effort" (Barak); "The professors didn't seem to care about

the students. If the teacher doesn't want to interact, why should I take the course seriously? It killed the interest" (Kuralai). Malika also explained that:

The overall experience depends on how engaging the teacher is, how the course is taught, and how knowledge is assessed. The best courses for me have been those where the teaching style and content were both well-matched and effective.

It shows the high level of importance for the students to feel instructors' active presence during classes.

Younger assistants were attributed as having more "time and energy" for individual students.

I can't remember the exact name of the course, but we had a couple of younger teaching assistants who were younger than the main professors. And, probably because of that, they had more time and energy to focus on individual students. (AseI)

Notably, one student reported that taking a course without an acquaintance or friend made it less engaging to her:

It seems to me that these were courses that I took alone, without acquaintances, or courses where I could not make friends with someone. The courses that I remembered were usually related to communicating with people with whom we then closed everything together: we consulted, checked each other, and did some kind of reviews. But the courses I took alone felt more like an obligation. I just had to go through them and close them. There was no community or support. It was just a job, nothing pleasant. I don't even remember the names of some of these courses. (Aisulu)

Overall, low faculty involvement, lack of peer collaboration and group works were some of factors that made students feel less engaged towards online learning. One suggestion offered by the respondent is to make intervention in terms of format of assignments. One of

the participants expressed this as: “Including discussions and interesting tasks instead of test format-like tasks would make it more engaging” (Nazym).

Moving forward, the majority of participants indicated their non-engagement in extracurricular activities during online learning:

During my bachelor’s, I was very active in volunteering clubs and extracurricular activities when it used to be offline. But when we moved online, those clubs either closed or became inactive. Because of this, I felt less connected to the university.
(Aida)

Additionally, unlike the majority, some students have shown their indifference towards participating in any kind of university club activities: “I was not a sociable person at all. And during the quarantine, I didn’t feel any social need either. Because that’s how I was originally” (Barak).

This data clearly indicates a low level, or even a lack, of social engagement among learners in terms of actively participating and engaging with university activities beyond their studies.

Subsequently, when students were describing their relationship with peers they mostly described them as “formal”. Students’ main motive to communicate with their peers was working on the same assignment or group project:

During online I didn’t actually communicate with someone particularly with a goal that I need to have a friend in that terms. It was just like group projects or some kind of small talk like, I don’t know, meeting with someone online. It was really, really temporary. So, I can say that people who I met online are not in my life anymore.(Aizhan)

Even so, one participant recalled an action that had taken place during online studies which relates to social engagement dimension. Specifically: “One cool thing we did was record

video birthday greetings. Each person recorded a personal message, and the videos were compiled and sent to the birthday person. It was memorable and heartfelt” (Barak). Furthermore, when talking with respondents about student-faculty interaction there were contrary opinions. Online learning has a distinctive feature: a spatial separation between professors and students. As a result, online teacher-student interactions, which are fundamental to relationship formation, present greater challenges. Some respondents described their relationship with faculty as “purely businesslike relationship” which indicates absence of social engagement. Several participants expressed how they felt detached from being able to engage in any kind of relationship with faculty members and its impact on their studies: “Honestly, the professors I had good relationships with the ones I interacted with during offline classes. Online, I didn’t really attempt to build a rapport with professors—it was more neutral” (Temirlan); “I think professors didn’t see the need to build relationships with students during quarantine. If you don’t know the person teaching you, you don’t feel motivated to study” (Aida).

Nevertheless, there were some cases when respondents were able to positively maintain connections with university members: “Some professors were more communicative. For example, one shared grant opportunities with us, which was helpful” (Aida); “Everything changed when I wrote a letter to my advisor. I just said, “Hello, I exist.” This led to a four-hour conversation where we discussed online experiences, emotions, and more. It helped to break the barrier and see that professors are the same people. This made further communication much easier” (Kuralai).

The collected data on course materials and assessments revealed that respondents evaluate the provided course materials as sufficient which is expressed by: “I don’t remember there being any problems with the material” (Medet).

4.5 Challenges Students Faced during Online Learning

Above all, it was also crucial to reveal challenges that students have faced during online learning. Among nine participants four distinct challenges were identified. Some participants also revealed several difficulties they've encountered during a course of period.

4.5.1 Technical Barriers

The frequently mentioned one was about technical issues. One participant stated that:

The most I would say stressful challenge was connected with examination period because you had to have like great technical connection but sometimes it was still like really of a low quality and that is an exam that is going on and you cannot like control the time and the connection at the same time and you have to like do something for your exam. (Aizhan)

It is also worth noting that not all the professors had the same level of competency in conducting online classes from the very beginning. Most professors who taught technical courses, such as Mathematics and Computer Science, adapted more quickly since their teaching methods were already structured similarly, even in the offline format. Unlike the other professors for whom it took some time to fully adjust and feel confident in the technical aspect of teaching. Participants stated that:

It was noticeable that the quality suffered a little—they [non- technical professors] used fewer tools, and they were less familiar with some of them. Over time, there was noticeable progress, as various cool features on Moodle for online learning started to be used. At first, it was just Zoom and sharing presentations, but gradually, different professors started applying various tricks to enhance their teaching methods. (Medet)

A lot of the challenges I faced during online stemmed from technical difficulties, such as professors not fully understanding how to use software like Zoom. For example, their stylus or tablet might stop working mid-lesson, causing delays until they fix it.

(Barak)

Furthermore, Asel highlighted the difference between levels of digital literacy among professors: “Younger professors were better at understanding how to use technology, how to create links for conferences. But older professors often faced difficulties, and students had to help them”.

One respondent mentioned that the process of “appeal” was more complex due to distrust of potential cheating: “Online, it’s not guaranteed that you’ll get face-to-face contact. Even if you want to appeal, the professor might question whether you cheated or made mistakes. That creates uncertainty” (Temirlan).

4.5.2 Communication issues

Along with technical issues, communication issues with parents persisted. Some of the students commented: “My parents didn’t understand stress related to exams” (Aizhan); “Parents didn’t understand the demands of studying for six hours a day” (Kuralai).

4.5.3 Socialization issues

Apart from that, lack of interaction and socialization was playing a big role in students’ lives:

I think the biggest challenge of all for me was missing out on the full student experience. I felt like I missed out on the opportunity of student experience. After all, the pandemic really dampened my enthusiasm for my personal goals. (Temirlan)

I would say that if I had full experience of studying as a full-time student, I would have

had more friends, I would have participated in more clubs, but I only had a small group of people, whom I continued communication with. (Aizhan)

4.5.4 Lack of Motivation

Moreover, several participants highlighted absence of “concentration” and “motivation” during online studies compared to offline as an obstacle to being fully engaged in their studies. They mainly attributed it to the fact that “cameras weren’t mandatory” during lectures. For example, participants stated: “There was a time, honestly, when it was almost a joke—everyone would sleep, and the professor knew it perfectly well but would continue lecturing because it had to be done” (Aida); “I just used to just turn on the Webex and listen to professors while sleeping” (Nazym).

Some student also felt that being overly comfortable at home also had its impact on their motivation and willingness to study:

Before that I used to study at [private school name] and would only come home during vacations. So, I had this association that being at home meant doing nothing and just relaxing. But during my studies, when I had to return home, I had to rebuild my attitude towards studying. I needed to understand that education is something I need for myself and that I’m the only one responsible for my focus and concentration. (AseI)

Moreover, Aida also noted that: “At home, you don’t want to study—you want to chill.”

4.5.5 Emotional Issues

Several students reported experiencing challenging mental states during online learning, such as “depressive states,” “anxiety attacks,” “chronic stress,” “anxious periods,” and “emotional dissatisfaction.” They described these experiences as: “I had some sleep, but emotional relaxation seemed like a luxury” (Aisulu).

4.5.6 Faculty Accessibility

Others expressed the difficulty of connecting with faculty and receiving feedback in an online format. They point out that when seeking feedback online, they faced more uncertainty:

[In an] online, you had to figure out how to contact professors, where to write, and then hope they would respond back. The whole process became much more complicated.

Feedback was much harder to get during online compared to offline. (Temirlan)

Some professors didn't provide detailed answers—they'd just say, "You scored 60 points" but wouldn't tell you which questions were correct or incorrect. I believe they avoided sharing detailed feedback because they reused those questions in finals. This made it very inconvenient because you wouldn't know where you went wrong, which topics to revisit, or which ones were fine. It was frustrating when professors didn't give feedback on quizzes. (Medet)

Conversely, there were cases when students experienced total absence of feedback. It may be due to the nature of the course which did not require written feedback. Mathematics major student stated:

As for mathematics, I honestly don't remember much about it. I don't recall solving problems, submitting them, or even receiving feedback. Perhaps it didn't happen at all, because if it had, I feel like I'd remember it. I don't remember any feedback. (Barak)

In contrast, there was a participant who highlighted importance of the reverse feedback to enhance faculty's engagement:

The key is to be proactive, show interest, and give feedback to professors. It's hard for professors to stay motivated without student engagement. That's why it's important for students to give feedback to professors. When professors see that students are

interested, they become more motivated. The relationship between professors and students is also a human one, requiring mutual involvement and effort. (Asef)

It shows the importance of delivering feedback not only to the recipients but also to the instructors, putting a mutual effort to enhance the learning process. Finally, one participant also evaluated the feedback quality not only at the “availability level” but also reflected on the “harshness” of it:

Good feedback strongly depends on the emotional maturity of the professor. I had a professor who said at the first lecture: “60% of you will fail the course.” This greatly influenced the students. Many either dropped out or switched to another major because of either harsh criticism or other factors. (Kuralai)

However, one other respondent interpreted the “negative” feedback from positive side saying that:

When I got negative feedback, I tried working harder, and as a result, my grade and the feedback that the teacher gave me improved. When I see something negative, I try to solve that. But when I saw something positive, I was like, okay, that’s nice, but it did not really improve my motivation to work on the subject. (Nazym)

4.5.7 Suggestions and Recommendations

Finally, students were asked for possible suggestions and recommendations for an online format of learning. Those students who were obtaining their degree specifically in pedagogical field highlighted the importance of practical knowledge:

Everything else, like theoretical knowledge, can be caught up with later, depending on the person. But those unique, hands-on moments—when you actually experience teaching and practice it yourself—are irreplaceable. If the third year had

been online, it would have been a huge loss. That school practice was invaluable. It gave us real-life experience that you can't replace. (Barak)

I'm quite confident in academic stuff because I tried to study at least good but my teaching, after I graduated, I got my bachelor, at first, I tried working everywhere, but teaching, so, I wasn't really confident in my teaching after bachelor. (Malika)

This emphasizes how necessary it is for prospective teachers to have their educational practice in an offline setting to get a full understanding and practical experience firsthand.

Another important aspect mentioned by students was to create dividing line between various activities happening in one place:

From my own experience, I think it is very important to categorize your life. For example, you have your time for work, and then you have your time for your family and friends. Basically, it is bordering those spheres, because I think that when you are online, everything can be mixed up, and you just get lost at some point and again, that you are dealing with it by yourself, and it could also lead to some well-being problems. So have an understanding of when you have the role of a student, when you have the role of a child, or a friend, or a partner. (Kuralai)

Additionally, students mentioned prioritizing health and basic needs before any kind of academic activities:

Academic success isn't the most important thing in life. Prioritize your health—how you eat, sleep, and feel. Cover your basic needs first. Once you do that, focus on academics. If you're sleep-deprived or eating junk food, your body and mind will give out. You can't build relationships or think about higher-level goals like education or philosophy if your basic needs aren't met. (Medet)

I would recommend doing sports for physical health and projects that are related to

your field, finding a part-time job so that you get paid for it, and so that you can participate in various activities. (Aisulu)

4.6 Summary

In summary, the diverse experiences of university students' experience of online learning emphasize its multifaceted nature, ranging from students' attitudes to various challenges. Different cases shaped students' attitudes towards online learning, emphasizing the need for focusing on improving online learning experience for students. The findings also highlight positive and negative experiences and that the latter one was primarily affected by the limits of communication due to lack of real life communication and rapid widespread cheating. As for the positive side, being able to balance work and study and convenience played a good impact. A number of students also reported that they did not feel very confident in their academic abilities due to increased memory retention loss. Engagement has a number of dimensions as follows: behavioral, cognitive, collaborative, social and emotional. As for cognitive dimensions, it was a sudden need to switch to an online format which resulted in low motivation of students. However, students mentioned that adapting flipped format and instructors' demanding approach played an important role and impacted increased motivation. Moving forward, students mentioned attendance checks and personal interest in the subject as a part of the behavioral dimension. The peer assessment and group works were categorized towards collaborative dimension. Lastly, mentions of the importance of instructors' involvement, taking courses with group mates were highly influenced by student engagement level attributes to social engagement. However, student involvement in the extracurricular activities which were highly restricted was significantly low and almost all students mentioned being non-engaged in any clubs during the pandemic period. Apart from that, challenges identification revealed a number of issues including technical, communication,

socialization, motivational and emotional.

Finally, students were required to provide their own recommendation and those who graduated from pedagogical majors emphasized the importance of specifically having practical and off site teaching experience. Aside from that, a number of students said that health and physical activities should be prioritized. In general, the findings provided details into the dynamic nature of student engagement, challenges, and highlight reasons that impacted students' engagement. The following chapter will discuss the results of the findings from the preceding chapter in relation to the body of literature currently in publication and its implications.

Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings from the study, linking them to the research questions, existing literature, and conceptual framework. As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the widespread adoption of online formats across various educational sectors, significantly impacting higher education. Although it ended several years ago, some educational institutions have implemented online learning as a possible option for conducting studies. Despite the widespread adoption of online education, studies on student engagement remain scarce, which is crucial due to its significant impact on the learning process. The main purpose of this study was to explore students' attitudes toward online learning, interpreting whether students' experiences fit into Redmond et al.'s (2018) Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education and can be evaluated through different dimensions. Lastly, the study's goal was to explore challenges students encountered in an educational context of online learning in higher education. This chapter covers each research question separately by the order they are stated above.

5.2 Student Perceptions of Online Learning Experiences

The first research question was "What are students' perceptions toward online learning?". Notably, the findings revealed that participants had a spectrum of experiences, both positive and negative, which articulated and derived throughout the whole period of distance learning. Though Sinatra et al. (2015) noted that "both negative and positive emotions can facilitate activation of attention and engagement" (p. 2), the present research diverges by showing that negative emotions mainly lead to dissatisfaction and low engagement, while still supporting effects of positive emotions. It is equally critical to

highlight that the participants in the present study consist of individuals who shifted to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, their transition to online learning was rather forced than initiated by their own motivations. Hence, considering this factor it is important to note that the current research looks at student experiences of online learning during the COVID era. Precisely, by looking at the students perception it is possible to identify the engagement dimension according to the Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education. Trowler (2010) states that “students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging”. As a result, person can have either positive or negative perception of the learning which will eventually have an impact on the level of engagement.

5.2.1 Positive Attitude

A majority of respondents indicated that the ability to balance work and study was a significant advantage for them during their studies. Though Farrell and Brunton’s (2020) study indicates that being a successful online student was influenced by the structural burden of life load, with the greatest challenge being the need to balance studies with other significant and time-consuming responsibilities, such as work, family and caregiving. The present research diverges by showing that the ability to balance two aspects of life such as work and education were perceived more positively, while still supporting the notion of importance of handling these aspects properly. This misalignment can be explained by the fact that previous literature mainly examined adult learners as Serdyukov and Serdyukova (2006) stated that the percentage of adults in postgraduate educational programs is much higher.

Findings also revealed that convenience of the online format was also reported as a positive side from learners’ perspective. These findings are consistent with previous research (Almahasees et al., 2021) which also found that students expressed that online

learning allows them to have access to materials whenever they find it convenient when classes are held asynchronously. Similarly, these findings align with those of Chang et al. (2021) where dental students generally believed that online class learning had a better learning effectiveness, especially in terms of effective usage of time, clear course screens, and convenient learning method. This emerging pattern can be explained by the fact that the pre-recorded courses, especially lecture format alike, were convenient for students to watch and study repeatedly on their own (Chang et al., 2021). This pattern also supports the findings of the previous literature (Belhaj et al., 2022) where student self-regulation appears to be the major factor affecting their motivation toward learning. It is explained that when students discover things themselves on their own will be more successful in their learning process. Therefore, being less dependent on external factors and being able to find appropriate time for studying leads to better academic outcomes.

5.2.2 Negative

Aside from positive, several participants highlighted some recurring negative experiences, such as not being able to connect with others which led to isolation. These findings can be explained with those of Cole et al. (2019), who reported that active learning practices and an online learning climate that fosters peer communication and collaboration are course elements over which instructors can provide much influence. Therefore, the lack of connection with peers resulted in the negative experience of online learning. Additionally, it is consistent with studies conducted in Kazakhstan (Namysova et al., 2019) which also found that while having online sessions master students did not have an opportunity to discuss their projects with their peers, making students feel isolated from group mates during the important stage of the course. This is clear evidence of the importance of social connection and building community in an online environment as well. The notion further supported Anastasakis et al. (2021) findings which explored difficulties

undergraduates from Greek higher educational institutions faced during the transition to online learning, found that undergraduates identified limited social interactions in a synchronous online environment as a key barrier, comprising 18.71% of reported challenges.

Another pattern evolved from the findings was that cheating was more explicit due to the online format of courses and weakened proctoring practices. According to the interviews, students had expressed a high concern regarding the increased cheating issues during pandemic. These findings are similar to Chang et al. (2021) quantitative study where most students thought that online examinations had operational and fairness issues and had preference to physical classroom examination. In a similar vein, in qualitative research (Erguvan, 2021) focused on examining cheating, faculty members reported that they believe that online learning has increased opportunities for contract cheating, leading to at least 25% of their students turning to essay mills within this digital learning context.

Another major pattern emerged from respondents indicating low knowledge retention during distance learning and inability to recall taught materials after some periods of time. Similarly, Sunday et al. (2021) discussed the effects of COVID-19 on retention ability in tertiary institutions. They stated that the retention ability of a students' general course in university was very low because of the isolation created during the covid-19 total lockdown.

5.3 Key Engagement Dimensions Influencing Online Learning Experiences and Their Impact

The second research question asked “Which of the engagement dimensions significantly impact online learning experiences and why?”. Remarkably, out of the five dimensions presented by Redmond et al. (2018) within the Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education, two types of student engagement dimensions were brought up;

namely, cognitive and social engagement dimensions.

As for the cognitive dimensions, interviews revealed that since the respondents were “forced” to change the format from offline to online, the change was induced rather than pre-planned. Due to this, interview findings demonstrated that as the change was rapid and unintentional institutions and students themselves were not fully ready which affected their motivation to study drastically. These results represent the first direct demonstration of Belhaj et al. (2022) empirical study, which stated that self-regulation has a significant positive effect on students’ motivation toward online learning during Covid-19 ($R^2= 0.68$, $P=0.00$). Respondents also noted that the ability to “quickly learn and adapt” was key as they were exposed to different technologies and practices constantly. Examples of the skills noted are time management, discipline, accountability, and communication skills, among others, as evidenced by this student’s responses. It is consistent with studies conducted on researching skills that are vital to possess and develop in order to be engaged in a distance learning including: time management, autonomous learning ability, self-regulated learning (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Guo et al., 2024; Su et al., 2024).

Furthermore, findings revealed that the professor’s level of involvement was playing a vital role in students’ level of engagement. Participants report that if they noticed the low level of engagement from professors, they tended to put less effort towards being active in this course as well. These findings concur with Stone & O’Shea’s (2019) conclusions that teacher support has a crucial role in online courses, with faculty engagement and meaningful connections having a positive impact on online student retention. Moreover, the present findings are consistent with Belhaj et al.’s (2022) work that deals with the significant effect of dialogue with instructors on students’ motivation toward online learning, highlighting the crucial role instructors play in enhancing motivation in virtual settings. The emergence of the communication and teacher-student

relationship theme is understandable since, the main psychosocial impact on online student engagement was found to arise from interaction with the community, which fostered feelings of support and belonging (Farrell & Brunton's 2020).

5.4 Specific Challenges Students Face during Online Learning in Higher Education

The third research question asked was: What are the specific challenges students face during online learning in higher education, and how can these challenges be addressed effectively? According to the research, the frequently arising challenges from the interviews were technical issues, lack of motivation as well as lack of faculty accessibility. The study's findings also showed that non-technical faculty members were less familiar with digital tools and lacked the digital skills to adjust their teaching to online mode in the early days of transition. As a result, the majority of respondents mentioned it as a main barrier to receiving lessons effectively at the beginning of the pandemic era. This could be a result of sudden online disruption to which the many educational institutions were not fully adjusted compared to traditional face-to-face teaching (Almahasees et al., 2021). Similarly, the literature indicated that studying online without technological support tended to negatively affect the online learning experience and leads to lower academic achievements (Yu, 2022). In addition, Getenet et al. (2024) suggests that in the fast-evolving digital landscape, teachers must remain updated with the new tools and systems to effectively utilize and engage with information and communication technologies.

The study's findings also showed that lack of motivation prevailed among the factors that hinder high engagement levels in learners. Importantly, engagement is understood as the combination of internal and external motivation, along with the students' active commitment and conscious across all areas of their learning (Krause and Coates, 2008). It underpins the notion of close interconnectedness of motivation with student engagement. Notably, other research indicates that enhancing students' motivation within

the learning environment is one of the primary ways to improve their learning and engagement. Furthermore, according to self-efficacy theory learners will try harder when they believe they can succeed in a task which increases their motivation (Rajan et al., 2024). Furthermore, Farrell and Brunton (2020) pointed out that student engagement is affected by several interconnected psychosocial influences for example teaching support, motivation, skills and self-efficacy.

Another recurring challenge emerged from the findings was lack of faculty accessibility. This corresponds to Su et al. (2024) findings, which demonstrated that interaction between students and teachers in an online learning environment is a key determinant of successful results. These findings can be explained by the fact that instructors' availability and response time is one of the instructors' performance indicators (DeBourgh, 1999, as cited in Belhaj et al., 2022). Similarly, Al-Maskari et al. (2021) emphasized that unlike face-to-face teaching, wherein the students and faculty interact daily, online learning created a physical distance. As a result, there is clear evidence suggesting that teachers' active presence directly influences students' engagement levels. Therefore, not only peer interaction but teacher presence are equally important dimensions while considering student engagement in educational settings (Dixson, 2015).

5.5 Summary

Current research tried to look at the student engagement phenomenon via assessing it through the Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education which helped to answer each question separately. Both research problems and research questions had been focused on exploring student engagement within educational institutions in Kazakhstan. Since the global pandemic had affected the educational sector and led to transition to fully online based infrastructure for a two year period there was a rapid change and demand for online education across the globe. Nevertheless, institutions are presently continuing to

deliver education through diverse modalities, including the sustained utilization of online learning. As a result, there is still a need to understand and assess various factors that impact engagement experiences.

Additionally, as presented findings explored experiences specifically focusing on Kazakhstani Higher Education, it offers valuable perspectives on the context of the county, providing a deeper understanding of local dynamics. The study's findings also supported studies from different parts of the world. Specifically, this research explored student negative and positive experiences of online learning, level of impact of engagement dimensions, and the main challenges students faced while being on online learning. It highlighted the importance of community building and developing a sense of belonging for successful educational outcomes. There have been a number of findings that will contribute to the existing pool of research in the related field of student engagement and expand on them. The importance of research findings will be concluded in the next chapter along with their significance and contribution to the research purpose and research questions. The chapter will also discuss the study's limitations while offering implications for further research.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by summarizing the primary research findings in relation to the research purpose and research questions along with their significance and contribution. It also reviews the limitations of the study and proposes implications and recommendations, as well as directions for future research in the area.

This concluding chapter summarizes the key findings of the research, their relevance to the research purpose and question, and their significance and contribution to the educational field. The chapter also addresses study limitations, provides recommendations for future research.

6.2 Major Findings

The study revealed that respondents' experiences and perceptions of online learning had a significant impact on their motivation and persistence to study. In other words, the level of student engagement was affected by the way students interpreted their experiences of online learning. Mixed perceptions were attributed to learners' personal motivations and goals rather than connected to specific learners' characteristics. In addition, although some students may have had high grades and performance it did not automatically predisposed them towards having a positive attitude towards a specific course. Furthermore, while some students appreciated the opportunity to be able to balance work and study, previous studies have indicated it as a challenging aspect of students' lives contradicting current findings.

One of the key discoveries of this study was the significant impact of cognitive and social dimensions of student engagement framework on student involvement. The findings were first categorized into five dimensions of engagement, such as emotional, cognitive,

behavioral, social, emotional and the significant impact was identified by the high number of participants who interpreted their experiences which were later defined as cognitive and social dimensions. As for cognitive engagement, while it is important to note the unexpected nature of transition to online learning, students' level of self-regulation and engagement was affected by their inner motivation. Moreover, findings regarding social dimension emphasized importance of developing relationships with faculty members. Interestingly, the more emotionally invested students were, the higher level of engagement and higher knowledge retention they reported. Therefore, being able to socially connect with instructors play a vital role in student engagement.

The research identified several important findings on challenges students faced, including technical difficulties including low digital literacy of faculty members, lack of motivation, and lack of faculty accessibility. The digital literacy findings revealed that low levels of faculty technical skills had a negative impact on lessons' quality. Moreover, lack of inner motivation could have hindered students from fully investing their attention and efforts towards learning. Lastly, lack of faculty accessibility, feedback quality, speed of response was playing a crucial role in student engagement levels as well.

6.3 Limitations and Recommendations

As for the limitation of this study the pool of respondents were limited to those who studied strictly during the pandemic period. Therefore, current research was limited in terms of offering and exploring experiences of current students enrolled in higher education. Conduction research on the students who are currently involved in online learning would bring its own advantages in order to create a clearer picture of online learning experiences now. It would also enable to understand students' experiences in real time setting which would provide more practical implications. Additionally, since participants were recalling events that occurred some time ago, their memories may have

been distorted to a certain degree. Lastly, as the current research focused solely on learners, it is recommended that future studies also consider teachers' perspectives to capture a fuller range of experiences.

6.4 Personal Reflections

The experience of working on this thesis has been incredibly intensive, challenging, and rewarding. Throughout this journey, I have had the opportunity to fully immerse myself in the area of qualitative research, gaining a deeper understanding of how to approach different people and explore their experiences in a meaningful and respectful way. Conducting interviews, analyzing data, and reflecting on various perspectives have all contributed to shaping not only my academic growth but also my personal development. Through this research, I have learned to apply and strengthen essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and effective communication. These skills have become an integral part of my learning process and will undoubtedly be transferable to other professional areas of my life beyond academia. I now feel more confident in my ability to navigate complex situations, work with diverse groups of people, and make thoughtful, well-informed decisions. Moreover, this experience taught me the importance of patience, perseverance, and adaptability when facing unexpected challenges. It showed me that research is not a linear path but a dynamic process that requires both flexibility and determination. Overall, completing this thesis has been a transformative experience, and I am grateful for the knowledge and skills it has helped me develop.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Completed AI Declaration Form



Thesis Title:

Exploring University Students' Experiences of Online Learning and Engagement

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

- with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or
- without the use of artificial intelligence tools.

(If you have used AI tools as defined in the GSE policy document, please complete the rest of this form.)

During the preparation of this thesis/examination, I used ChatGPT to paraphrase and structure and organize the written text.

I also declare that I

- am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),
- have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,
- am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,
- have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and
- acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding appropriate AI use.

Name: Aigerim Millyatova
Date: 25.04.25

Signature: 

Appendix B

Consent Form

Introduction. You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “Exploring University Students’ Experiences of Online Learning and Engagement”

Procedures. The main purpose of this study is to explore student engagement within online education provided by a university, focusing specifically on their experiences as remote learners. Additionally, the study will investigate the prevailing factors affecting student engagement in online learning in Kazakhstan universities. This interview will take approximately 40 minutes to complete.

Risks. The potential risks of participating in this study are emotional distress as recalling some of the experiences may cause a specific discomfort. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you are free to skip any questions or make use of your right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any consequences.

Benefits. The potential benefits are understanding university students’ experience in order to find ways to improve online learning quality in higher education and make possible interventions in education policies over time. Based on the future findings, university administration and faculty will have an opportunity to revise the efficiency of this mode of study and consider making further changes. Additionally, the study will investigate the prevailing factors affecting student engagement in online learning in Kazakhstan universities. It may then indicate effective engagement strategies in online classes to increase student involvement in online learning.

Compensation. No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study.

Confidentiality & Privacy. Any information obtained for this study through which you might be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Your answers will be anonymized in the reporting of the results. Raw data will be maintained in a secure location and no identifying information will be used in the final thesis or subsequent publications. No one, other than me, will have access to the raw data. All audio recordings, and other documents, except for the consent forms, will not be shared with any third party at the conclusion of this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your decision, whether you decided to participate, will not affect your future relations with Nazarbayev University. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any further commitments.

Points of Contact. It is understood that should any questions or comments arise regarding this project, the Principal Investigator, *Aigerim Millyatova*, +7 708 977 71 80, *aigerim.millyatova@nu.edu.kz* should be contacted. Any other questions or concerns may be addressed to the Nazarbayev University Institutional Research Ethics Committee, *resethics@nu.edu.kz*.

Statement of Consent.

I, _____,

Give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.

The researchers clearly explained to me the background information and objectives of the study and what my participation in this study involves.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can at any time and without giving any reasons withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for myself.

I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Форма согласия

Введение. Вам предлагается принять участие в исследовании под названием «Изучение опыта студентов университета в области онлайн-обучения и вовлеченности».

Процедуры. Основная цель данного исследования - изучить вовлеченность студентов в формате онлайн-обучения, предоставляемое университетом, уделяя особое внимание их опыту в качестве удаленных студентов. Кроме того, в ходе исследования будут изучены преобладающие факторы, влияющие на вовлеченность студентов в онлайн-обучении в казахстанских университетах. Интервью займет около 40 минут.

Риски. Потенциальные риски участия в этом исследовании включают эмоциональный дискомфорт, так как воспоминания о некоторых опытах могут вызвать определенное неудобство. Если в любой момент вы почувствуете себя некомфортно, вы можете пропустить вопрос или воспользоваться своим правом выйти из исследования в любое время без каких-либо последствий.

Преимущества. Потенциальная польза заключается в понимании опыта студентов университета для поиска путей повышения качества онлайн-обучения в высшем образовании и возможного вмешательства в образовательную политику с течением времени. На основе полученных результатов у администрации и преподавателей университета появится возможность пересмотреть эффективность данного способа обучения и рассмотреть возможность внесения дальнейших изменений. Кроме того, в ходе исследования будут изучены преобладающие факторы, влияющие на вовлеченность студентов в онлайн-обучение в казахстанских университетах. Затем

можно будет определить эффективные стратегии вовлечения в онлайн-занятия, чтобы повысить вовлеченность студентов в онлайн-обучение.

Компенсация. Никакой материальной компенсации не будет предоставлено. Копия результатов исследования будет предоставлена по его завершении.

Приватность и Конфиденциальность. Любая информация, полученная в рамках данного исследования, по которой вас могут идентифицировать, останется конфиденциальной и будет раскрыта только с вашего разрешения. Ваши ответы будут обезличены при представлении результатов. Необработанные данные будут храниться в надежном месте, и никакая идентифицирующая информация не будет использована в окончательном варианте диссертации или последующих публикациях. Никто, кроме меня, не будет иметь доступа к необработанным данным. Все аудиозаписи и другие документы, за исключением форм согласия, не будут переданы третьим лицам по завершении исследования.

Добровольный характер исследования. Участие в данном исследовании является исключительно добровольным. Ваше решение, независимо от того, решили вы участвовать или нет, не повлияет на ваши дальнейшие отношения с Назарбаев Университетом. Более того, вы можете отказаться от участия в исследовании в любое время без каких-либо дополнительных обязательств.

Контактные лица. В случае возникновения каких-либо вопросов или комментариев по данному проекту, следует обращаться к главному исследователю Айгерим Мильятовой, +7 708 977 71 80, aigerim.millyatova@nu.edu.kz. С любыми другими вопросами и замечаниями можно обращаться в Комитет по этике институциональных исследований Назарбаев Университета, resethics@nu.edu.k

Заявление о согласии.

Я, _____,

даю добровольное согласие на участие в данном исследовании.

Исследователи четко объяснили мне исходную информацию и цели исследования, а также то, что предполагает мое участие в этом исследовании.

Я понимаю, что мое участие в данном исследовании является добровольным. Я могу в любое время и без объяснения причин отозвать свое согласие, и это не повлечет за собой никаких негативных последствий для меня.

Я понимаю, что информация, собранная в ходе данного исследования, будет рассматриваться конфиденциально.

Подпись: _____ Дата: _____

Исследователь:

Подпись: _____ Дата: _____

Келісім нысаны

Кіріспе. Сізді “Жоғары Оқу Орындарындағы (ЖОО) студенттерінің онлайн оқыту және қатысу тәжірибесін зерттеу” атты ғылыми зерттеуге қатысуға шақырамыз.

Процедуралар. Бұл зерттеудің басты мақсаты – университет ұсынған онлайн білім беру жүйесінде студенттердің қатысу тәжірибесін зерттеу, әсіресе қашықтықтан оқитын студенттердің тәжірибесіне баса назар аудару. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу барысында Қазақстандық Жоғары Оқу Орындарында (ЖОО) студенттердің онлайн оқуға қатысуына әсер ететін негізгі факторлар анықталынады. Сұхбат шамамен 40 минутқа созылады.

Тәуекелдер. Бұл зерттеуге қатысудың ықтимал тәуекелдері – кейбір тәжірибелерді еске түсіру белгілі бір қолайсыздық тудыруы мүмкін эмоционалды күйзеліс болып табылады. Егер кез келген уақытта өзіңізді жайсыз сезінсеңіз, сұрақтарды өткізіп жіберуге немесе зерттеуден кез келген уақытта бас тартуға құқығыңызды пайдалануға еркінсіз.

Пайдасы. Бұл зерттеудің пайдасы – университет студенттерінің тәжірибесін түсіну арқылы жоғары білім беру сапасын жақсарту және болашақта білім беру саясатына өзгерістер енгізу жолдарын табу. Болашақтағы нәтижелерге сүйене отырып, университет әкімшілігі мен оқытушылары бұл оқыту түрінің тиімділігін қайта қарастырып, одан әрі өзгерістер енгізу мүмкіндігіне ие болады. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу барысында Қазақстандық Жоғары Оқу Орындарын (ЖОО) студенттерінің онлайн оқуға қатысуына әсер ететін негізгі факторлар анықталады. Бұл кейінірек студенттердің онлайн сабақтарға қатысуын арттыру мақсатында тиімді қатысу стратегияларын көрсетуі мүмкін.

Сыйақы. Ешқандай материалдық сыйақы берілмейді. Бірақ сіз қызығушылық танытсаңыз, зерттеу нәтижелерінің көшірмесі зерттеу аяқталғаннан кейін сізге қолжетімді болады.

Құпиялылық және жеке мәліметтер. Зерттеу барысында алынған және сізді анықтауға мүмкіндік беретін кез келген ақпарат құпия сақталады және тек сіздің рұқсатыңызбен ғана жарияланады. Сіздің жауаптарыңыз нәтижелер туралы есептеуде анонимді түрде болады. Деректер қауіпсіз жерде сақталады және соңғы дипломдық жұмыс немесе кейінгі басылымдарда ешқандай жеке мәліметтер пайдаланылмайды. Менен басқа ешкім деректерге қол жеткізе алмайды. Барлық аудио жазбалар мен басқа құжаттар, келісім формаларын қоспағанда, зерттеу аяқталғаннан кейін ешбір үшінші тараппен бөлісілмейді.

Зерттеудің еріктілік сипаты. Бұл зерттеуге қатысу толығымен ерікті. Сіздің шешіміңіз, зерттеуге қатысу немесе қатыспау туралы, Назарбаев Университетімен болашақ қарым-қатынасыңызға ешқандай әсер етпейді. Сонымен қатар, сіз кез келген уақытта зерттеуден бас тартуға құқылысыз, бұл сізге ешқандай теріс салдар тудырмайды.

Байланыс ақпараттары. Егер осы жобаға қатысты қандай да бір сұрақтар немесе пікірлер туындаса, бас зерттеуші Айгерім Мильятова, +7 708 977 71 80, aigerim.millyatova@nu.edu.kz байланысуға болады. Сондай-ақ ескерту немесе сұрақтарыңыз болса Назарбаев Университетінің Институционалдық Зерттеулер Этикасы Комитетінің resethics@nu.edu.kz электронды поштасына хат жолдай аласыз.

Келісім туралы мәлімдеме.

Мен, _____, Осы зерттеуге қатысуға өз еркіммен келісім беремін. Зерттеуші маған зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты мен міндеттерін, сондай-ақ осы зерттеуге қатысуым нені қамтитынын түсіндірді. Мен бұл зерттеуге қатысуым ерікті екенін түсінемін. Мен кез келген уақытта және ешқандай себептерсіз келісімді кері қайтарып ала аламын, және бұл мен үшін ешқандай жағымсыз салдар әкелмейді.

Мен осы зерттеу барысында жиналған ақпараттың құпия сақталатынын түсінемін.

Қолтаңба: _____ Күні: _____

Зерттеуші:

Қолтаңба: _____ Күні: _____

Appendix C

The Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to choose online education at the university level?
2. What does/did a typical day look like for you as an online student?
3. Are there any specific courses or experiences that you found particularly valuable or disappointing during your online education?
4. What improvements would you suggest for making the content more engaging?
5. How do/did you feel about the way course materials are presented in your online classes?
6. How do/did you feel about the assessment methods used in your online courses?
7. How would you rate the quality of the feedback you received, and how did it affect your engagement and understanding of the material?
8. How confident do/did you feel about your academic abilities in an online learning environment?
9. What advice would you give to future students who want to study in an online format?
10. What do you think about the way online learning affects student engagement and social relationships?
11. How do you feel about the relationship between students and faculty in an online learning environment?
12. What specific strategies did you use to succeed in online learning?

Вопросы для интервью

1. Что побудило вас выбрать онлайн-образование на уровне университета?
2. Как выглядит/выглядел ваш типичный день как онлайн-студента?
3. Были ли какие-либо конкретные курсы или опыты, которые вы считаете особенно ценными или разочаровывающими в вашем онлайн-образовании?
4. Какие улучшения вы бы предложили для того, чтобы сделать контент более увлекательным?
5. Как вы/чувствовали, как представляются учебные материалы в ваших онлайн-курсах?
6. Как вы/чувствовали себя относительно методов оценки, использованных в ваших онлайн-курсах?
7. Как бы вы оценили качество обратной связи, которую вы получили, и как это повлияло на вашу вовлеченность и понимание материала?
8. Насколько уверенно вы/чувствовали себя в своих академических способностях в онлайн-обучении?
9. Какие советы вы бы дали будущим студентам, которые хотят учиться в онлайн-формате?
10. Как вы думаете, как онлайн-обучение влияет на вовлеченность студентов и социальные отношения?
11. Как вы относитесь к отношениям между студентами и преподавателями в онлайн-обучении?
12. Какие конкретные стратегии вы использовали для того, чтобы преуспеть в онлайн-обучении?

Сұхбат сұрақтары

1. Университет деңгейінде онлайн білім алуға не түрткі болды?
2. Онлайн студент ретінде сіздің күнделікті күніңіз қалай өтті?
3. Онлайн білім алуда қандай да бір ерекше құнды немесе көңіл қалдыратын курстар мен тәжірибелер болды ма?
4. Мазмұнды қызықты ету үшін қандай жақсартуларды ұсынар едіңіз?
5. Онлайн сабақтардағы оқу материалдарының ұсынылуы туралы не ойлайсыз?
6. Онлайн курстардағы бағалау әдістері туралы не ойлайсыз?
7. Алуған кері байланыстың сапасын қалай бағалайсыз және ол материалды түсіну мен қатысуыңызға қалай әсер етті?
8. Онлайн білім алу жағдайында өзіңіздің академиялық қабілеттеріңізге қаншалықты сенімді болдыңыз?
9. Онлайн форматта оқу үшін болашақ студенттерге қандай кеңестер берер едіңіз?
10. Онлайн білім алу студенттердің қатысуы мен әлеуметтік қатынастарына қалай әсер етеді деп ойлайсыз?
11. Онлайн білім алу жағдайында студенттер мен оқытушылар арасындағы қарым-қатынас туралы не ойлайсыз?
12. Онлайн білім алуда табысқа жету үшін қандай нақты стратегияларды қолдандыңыз?