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Research Article

Analyzing Students' Perceptions of Online Learning Models in Higher Education: An Exploratory Approach

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Abstract. This study examined online teaching models ascertaining both the advantages and disadvantages involved in implementing these strategies. It also explored future implications of this phenomenon. There have been different worldly transformations including the ones caused by COVID-19 which led to learning institutions adopting online learning and teaching models. While there are notable advantages in the usage of online learning, this phenomenon also presents new challenges for both learners and lecturers. This study explored both aspects of the transformation in an exploratory format from a students' perspective. Students are the prime beneficiaries of online learning models and therefore it is imperative to investigate their viewpoints in order to get full insights into the phenomenon. Data was collected from participants enrolled in online higher education courses using a purposive data collection method. Semi structured interviews were conducted using a questionnaire. The results suggest that acceptance and adoption rates of online learning are increasing. The adoption and effectiveness of online learning varies significantly among students and this is mainly based on access and affordability of technology, access to the internet, and students' preferences. Some potential students are not privileged enough to have access to technological tools and others lack the skills necessary to maneuver through online content. However

for those with access to technology, online learning was viewed as significantly beneficial and students have a positive attitude towards online learning models.

Keywords: Online learning, Information technology, Exploratory, Higher Education, Artificial intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is increasingly gaining momentum in the modern world. Many institutions are progressively embracing this relatively new phenomenon. Online learning was greatly influenced by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rafiq et al., 2024). Due to the global shutdown which was propelled by the pandemic, learning institutions were forced to explore alternatives in their course offering. They had to adjust to the plethora of online education and this is a trend that has remained in demand post pandemic (Rizvi and Nabi 2021; Basar et al., 2021). New online institutions are being established and even highly reputable institutions have incorporated an online learning component in their lessons (Elnour et al., 2023). This adoption of online learning is perhaps one of the greatest worldly transformations (Hidayat et al., 2024). It has led to a seismic shift in students' needs, preferences and actions (Bulington, 2025). Online learning has been made possible by the development of information and communication technology which has brought noticeable alterations in many aspects of life (Ernst and Young, 2013). There are various terms used for online teaching and learning, including e-Learning, Learning Management Systems (LMS), computer-mediated training, and web-based training (Mesesan-Schmitz and Coman, 2020). For the purposes of this study the term online learning is adopted. Online learning is any form of study that is conducted remotely, using technological tools mostly made possible by the availability of the internet (Erickson and Larwin, 2016; Oxford College, 2025).

Zahran (2002) defines online learning as an educational style which uses modern technological tools such as computers, smartphones, the internet, multimedia and other supportive tools to disseminate information to learners in a way that enables the learning process to be managed or controlled effectively. The availability of these technological tools ensures that lessons are availed throughout the world at any given time where there is access to the internet (Permatasari et al., 2024; Adebo, 2018). In essence, online learning enhances a learner-centred approach, whereby learners participate in the learning process (Pérez et al., 2023). Online learning can be in a form of micro-learning, synchronous, asynchronous, individualized learning, blended and open online learning. Each type has its pros and cons and their acceptability or adoption levels vary (Rahman, 2023). Different scholars have highly benefited from studying online particularly because it creates an environment whereby students can study while being employed on a full time basis (Mukhtar et al., 2020; Naseer, 2023). The availability of computers, smartphones, access to the internet and digital payment methods have highly contributed to the rise in online learning as earlier observed (Li and Lalani, 2020).

Similarly online learning appears to be relatively affordable when compared to traditional institutions and has presented an opportunity for students to study in different countries without having to solicit study permits (Regmi & Jones, 2020). Nonetheless, concerns associated with the quality and effectiveness of online learning is still a debatable subject (Yang & Cornelius, 2004; Webster, 2024). Some scholars argue that students in online classes somehow perform worse than their counterparts who are enrolled full time in traditional institutions. They suggest that there tends to be achievement gaps disproportionately touching students who are in marginalized groups and those from low income settings (Mandasari, 2021; Webster, 2024; Shah, 2021). Online learning requires collaborative learning which is driven by a number of different tools like social media, emails, video-conferencing, and workflow systems. These tools have assisted in making the world a smaller place for the students, creating possibilities for global collaborations and easy learning (Khaitan et al., 2017). While online learning in itself is relatively new, distance learning which was formerly known as correspondence learning is not necessarily new (Means et al., 2010; Bajić and Bajić, 2016).

Various institutions have been offering distance learning mostly through traditional postal mail. Gershon (2020) posits that distance learning is older than Google classroom, Zoom and even the internet itself. Historically, Gershon (2020) associates the commencements of correspondence learning with 1728 whereby Caleb Phillips from Boston, United States of America (USA) offered courses through traditional mail. In the late nineteenth century, more institutions began to adopt this practice and were providing degrees by correspondence. The shift from the term correspondence began in 1892 when the University of Wisconsin-Madison instigated the term distance education (Erickson, 2020; Gershon, 2020). During that period, prospective students could apply and send an application form to the institution by post. Once accepted, study material would be received through the post offices (Tulane University, 2024). The increase in access to technological innovations, including advancement in artificial intelligence (AI), adaptive learning algorithms and virtual reality have replaced this postal learning, resulting in more personalized and advanced learning proficiencies (McKinsey, 2023). With those realities it can be argued that online learning is an extension of the traditional distance learning through post-mail into digitalized platforms. This phenomenon of online learning presents both opportunities and challenges for students, lecturers and societies (Dhawan, 2020). The creation of online content becomes one of the challenges lecturers face. It calls for them to be more capacitated to be able to master how to create and upload the training materials which include discussions forums, slides, training videos and creating of online exams (Mandasari, 2021; Hidayat et al., 2024). For students challenges are mostly lack of interactions with lecturers directly, as online students tend to be many, making it very difficult for lecturers to attend to individual needs (Ortagus et al., 2024).

Moreover, some students find it difficult to get used to learning models that excludes the face to face interactions (Hidayat et al., 2024). The move from traditional learning to online learning attracted further concerns which included uncertainty of the quality of online learning, concerns in course design and also with the evaluation

of students work (Huang et al., 2020). The prolonged screen exposure also leads to health issues including eye strain, poor posture and other physical issues (Shah, 2022). Additionally, students might be tempted to cheat during online exams leading to the integrity of online learning being undermined (Najjar, 2025). Other challenges of online learning observed by Pillay and Madzimure (2023) include limited physical participation and potentially, low learning interest. Bharuthram and Kies (2012) also argue that online learning eliminates the need for human support; it is in nature time consuming and has the potential to demotivate students. In contrast, findings by Queiros and de Villiers (2016) seem to differ. Their study suggests that online learning has attracted strong social presence, timely feedback, improved interactions with facilitators, increased peer-to-peer contact through discussion forums and online learning appears to be attracting more interests among learners for various reasons. These variations necessitate further research into this phenomenon. This present study argues that students' experiences and institutions vary such that interactions, social presence, feedback and discussions differ from institution to institution. Therefore students' experiences cannot be put under one basket. Course content vary from institution to institution and normally the time frame offered to complete the degree is higher than completing a full time degree and other institutions offer self-pace qualifications (Means, 2010).

In the field of Theology, for example, this practice is common. Seminaries are increasingly offering online self-paced qualifications and online ordinations in the process increasing the number of qualified clergy with the necessary church management skills (Weems, 2024). Generally, biblical annals portray the Apostle Paul as the pioneer of distance education. Paul wrote letters to the saints sending them to different locations where he was spreading the 'good news' of Jesus Christ (Meeks, 2025; Bajić and Bajić, 2016; Corinthians 1:1-9; Galatians 1:1-24). Paul was an Apostle of Jesus Christ who dedicated his life to spread the gospel to the gentiles in cities like Corinth, Thessalonica, Antioch, Galatia and Macedonia (White, 2015; 1; Thessalonians 4:14; 1 Corinthians 15:3-7). Paul wrote these letters to audiences he could not reach physically. Ministering and teaching from a distance was his strategy to instruct, train encourage believers without having to be present with them (Titus 1:5-16; 1 Corinthians 5:3). In essence Paul's letters present a dynamic view of distance education providing academic leaders with a biblical and theological framework for acknowledging hybrid online learning (Yuckman, 2022). Yuckman argues that Paul outgoing mail in the form of letters indicates that Paul's letters can be considered as a valid form of distance education. Like modern distance learning, Paul's approach included teaching people who he never met and those he might have met like his disciples (Bajić and Bajić, 2016). Apostle Paul's epistles can be used as practical example to illustrate how the teacher-learner relationship might look like in distance learning. The biblical narratives present further variations to the originality of distance learning. Nonetheless, while there are distinctions on the origins of distance learning, the conclusion is that distance learning is not new. Online learning then becomes a hybrid of an education system which was already in usage.

As online learning continues to break ground, a number of online scholarships also appear to be on the rise. Online scholarships are not only directed to theological

studies, but also cover different degrees in different fields of study. The significant rise in full and partial online scholarships for students globally, has sparked an interest on this model of study (Schulz, 2025, Miller, 2024). This study examined students' perceptions of online learning strategies. It is an exploratory study which also examined the advantages, disadvantages and future prospects of this phenomenon. Students' perspectives play a pivotal role in accessing online learning particularly because they are the prime beneficiaries. Their viewpoints present first hand insights into their educational expectations and experiences resulting in identifying the advantages and disadvantages of online learning (Najjar et al., 2025; Dawson et al., 2019).

In ascertain the dimensions which serve as alternatives for the effectiveness of the online learning process, learning theories relevant to online learning are important to address (Soliman et al., 2022). Theories associated with online learning include the behaviourist learning theory and the cognitive learning theory among others. According to the behaviourist learning theory students learn while acting as passive participants when information is transferred by the lecturer. This theory was viewed as appropriate for the transfer of objective information (Akinsanmi, 2008). In contrast the cognitive learning theory suggests that learning occurs when learners are active participants, inquiring and finding solutions by themselves. These two theories are not the only ones associated with learning but form part of the principles followed in Online learning among other things (Soliman et al 2022). Studies have shown that education is very important for the social and economic development of societies (Baber, 2021; Castro and Tumibay, 2021; Wobman, 2007). Seemingly, there is still a need for quality education as skills needed in the job market continue to evolve and online learning continues to be relevant in the present and future times. Online learning contributes greatly in availing those indispensable educational requirements (Wobman, 2007). According to Omar and Abu-dames (2017) education is the second influential factor in economic growth following technical progress. Consequently online learning and teaching is an essential pillar for attaining economic growth and is futuristic (Akpen et al, 2024). As online learning continues to evolve, open-source digital learning tools and applications for learning, control and management should be explored and implemented (Keeton, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODS

This qualitative study explored students' perceptions, advantages and disadvantages of online learning through an exploratory approach. This approach was seen as most appropriate in unveiling the intricacies associated with online teaching and learning. Exploratory is a valuable approach in asking questions to ascertain baseline information that could pave a way for further research (Pillay and Madzimure, 2023). It also helps in giving a more in-depth perspective in understanding the phenomenon (Putra, 2025). Data was collected from students who were enrolled in distance higher education institutions using a purposive data collection method. These participants were enrolled in different fields studying towards both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. All participants consented to participate in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions and benefits of online Learning

Online learning was perceived to be yielding positive gains for students and bridging the financial implications of on campus education. Participants were quick to highlight the affordability factor stating that online learning reduces accommodation fees, food and book fees. This outcome substantiates findings by Pillay and Madzimure (2023) which shown that online learning is relatively affordable in comparison to traditional on campus education. Similarly, Regmi & Jones (2020) also noted the affordability factor of online learning. The only costs associated with online learning are mostly registration fees and internet usage fees. The students can stay at home and eat whatever is available in the home setting. Participants' (82%) averred that traditional on campus institutions charge a lot for education and the entrance requirements were portrayed to be steep (Fauci et al., 2020). While there are scholarships for online learning, it was ascertained that not every student qualifies for those scholarships. According to Schulz (2025) students from marginalized societies, with average grades, find it difficult to get such scholarships. These scholarships seemed to be targeting high performing students and thus eliminating the average students. In online learning, the acceptance requirements were perceived to be relatively accommodative for most students (Miller, 2024). Normally, for most online institutions, the qualifying grade was placed by participants' at 60% and above. In some cases an average of 50% coupled with experience, would also be considered. The results show that online learning fosters self-discipline among learners (Pérez et al., 2023). Mostly online learning requires the student to work on his/her own in the comfort of his home or any appropriate place.

Most participants appeared to like this freedom. They divulged that they don't have to wake up early in the morning or attend classes in the afternoons when they are tired, but rather can choose a time which is convenient for them to study. This finding aligns with Muzayanah et al., (2025) who stated that online learning enables students to learn without any time or distance constraints. The results further suggest that online learning is good in the sense that the students can access the educational content at any time of the day (Singh et al., 2024). Some respondents 32% revealed that they prefer studying during the night time when all is quiet. Participants suggested that, studying at night increases concentration levels. While online learning tends to limit interaction levels, most institutions have included discussion forums in their online educational platforms which greatly promote discussions of topics and encourage participation in such platforms (Kinuthia and Dagada, 2008). Participants (67%) further submitted that these platforms help them in better understanding the subject particularly because they can also post questions of certain sections they do not understand. Furthermore, participants praised online learning citing the fact that they are able to enroll in reputable institutions abroad to further their studies without have to acquire study permits and bearing the cost of travel and the steep accommodation fees in abroad institutions (Naseer, 2023).

Seemingly, online learning provide various courses including for general certificates, diplomas, bachelor's degrees, master's degree and even doctorate degrees

as specified by Means (2010). Some students enrolled in the postgraduate levels stated that online learning is good for them based on the fact that they can work and study at the same time (Mukhtar et al., 2020). For them, studying is mostly reserved for the evenings and weekends because during the day their time is dedicated to their jobs. The findings revealed that online learning increases the chances of promotion at the workplace. Participants D and N confirmed this by stating that they got promoted as a result of their online studies. They are both enrolled for a Master of Business Administration fully offered online. While their studies are not completed yet, their enrolment and dedication to further their studies seemed to have attracted this milestone of promotion. Participant D in particular, showed her excited by saying:

'My enrolment for Postgraduate Studies really advanced my career. I was promoted to Senior Manager Strategy and Development position. This was unexpected, but it confirms that education is the key to success. I am currently doing my last year in my Master of Administration studies and now doing the research component of the degree. My degree is fully offered online and I have never attended an on-campus lesson. I can really recommend online learning to those who still doubt this model. It all lies on self-discipline, commitment and balancing your life accordingly.'

The above statement suggests that some potential students still doubt online learning. Perhaps some people still value the face to face interactions offered in on-campus settings and fear their lack of self-discipline, fear of failure, demotivation, fear of not getting a job and failure to commit to completing the online studies when there are no scheduled times for attending classes (Prashanti, 2020). This finding aligns with the results of a study done by Najjar (2025) which notes that there tends to be inefficiency in learning online. Such inefficiencies can be as a result of not understanding the course content, distractions at home, lack of self-discipline and demotivation due to isolation and lack of in-person interactions. The results from this present study further advocate that there are an increasing number of institutions offering Master of Business Administration and also Doctor of Philosophy (PhDs) online (Wobman, 2007). These are reputable institutions which are recognized worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to have increased access and preference of online learning. Two participants revealed that they are currently enrolled in a PhD programme abroad where they are doing research based degrees. For them this is a good platform because they don't have to travel abroad to have meetings with their supervisors (Bajić and Bajić, 2016). Conversations with supervisors are done online through emails, WhatsApp and they are able to use Zoom or WhatsApp video calling if a face to face meeting is necessary. Ramdhani and Nandiyanto (2021) also highlighted that WhatsApp is one medium which is highly used by students in online learning platforms. These students mentioned that they are able to defend their work through virtual platforms. Undergraduate participants also praised platforms such as emails, WhatsApp and Zooming revealing that such platforms make interactions easier.

Seemingly, some institutions require that students defend their proposals to the institution board or academic senate before they can proceed with the rest of their research (Pacheco-Vega, 2018). Similarly, once the research is completed, they also have to defend the final research to senate before they can graduate. Platforms like

Zoom make such defense possible. The results show that the effectiveness of online learning varies significantly among students and this is mainly based on access and affordability of technology. Some potential students are not privileged enough to have access to such facilities (Webster, 2024). However for those with access, online learning was viewed as significantly beneficial and positively impacting the lives of students.

Disadvantages and challenges of online learning

While online learning has some positive sides, participants had certain concerns. Apparently, online learning eliminates the experience of physical interactions with tutors, other students and reduces chances of developing relationships (Ortagus et al., 2024). Some participants enrolled at undergraduate levels, revealed that they would have loved to be on-campus to experience university life just like other students who are studying in traditional settings. Participants' further revealed that online learning results in loneliness and discouragement. According to Bharuthram and Kies (2012) online learning has an element of creating loneliness and may lead to students being demotivated to continue with their studies. Having to be confined in a home setting also reduces physical exercise necessary for the health of students (Shah, 2022). Additionally, the results disclosed that some companies are skeptical to employed students who studied online. There is still that element of discrimination within certain companies and this is one of the reasons why some students tend to avoid the online learning models (Kennedy, 2025). However, online learning appears to be slowly but surely adopted by an increasing number of companies across the world. One participant highlighted that after completing her first degree; she tried to apply for a teaching position abroad and was told that they don't accept degrees done online. This is not to say that all countries abroad reject online degrees. This participant said:

'It's so sad that there are still some countries and organizations that look down on online degrees. I was unable to get a teaching job in one of my dream countries because of my online degree. I felt so sad and then decided to continue with my studies. However, I have discovered that a lot of other countries in the world recognize these degrees. I will try again to apply once I complete my Postgraduate Diploma. I am passionate about teaching especially teaching English as a foreign language. I am positive that I will eventually; get a school abroad to teach this subject.'

Drawing from the above statement, it appears there are some organizations that undervalue the online qualifications. Perhaps it's a matter of accessing the institutions offering such qualifications partly because of the increase in institutions offering qualifications without the proper affiliations and accreditations (Paykamian, 2022). Seemingly, some institutions are after money as opposed to the quality of the education provided (Dumford and Miller, 2018). This could be the reason why some organizations undermine online education. However, the result of this study highlighted that there are a lot of reputable, accredited institutions offering online qualifications. These institutions employ qualified lecturers who studied in reputable universities (Rizvi and Nabi 2021; Elnour et al., 2023). Some participants suggested that it is unfair to reject every qualifications attained online. They submitted that

hiring organizations should rather vet the authenticity of the institution rather than reject all online qualifications. The rise in fake online colleges was viewed as a concern among most participants. Some online schools seemed to target vulnerable students promising to offer qualifications while not legit. After the students pay a registration fee, they are blocked from accessing the site. They lose their hard earned money (Adhana, 2025; Khumalo, 2025). Beier-de Haans (2010) states that it is a common practice that in every original concept there is a counterfeit. The Bible speaks of false prophets who imitated the original ones (Jeremiah 6:14). It even warns against such teachers demonstrating that fake elements are not new. Falsehood is a greedy concept meant to exploit vulnerable groups (Matthew 7:15-16; 2 Peter 2:1-3).

Participants advised that care should be taken when applying to study online. Some participants felt that the education system is negated by offering accelerated degrees and some even offer certificates without a student having to study anything. This trend was also perceived by Ferguson (2025) who theorizes that selling of academic qualifications exploits the education system and unsuspecting individuals. In a different note, participants were anxious about the lack of practical experiential work in online qualifications. They specified that certain subjects like agriculture, engineering and science subjects where laboratory experiments are necessary, a practical component is essential in order for the student to fully appreciate the subject. With online institutions, this is an element which is lacking (Mckinsey, 2023). However, some institutions recommend that students look for experiential attachment in organizations of their choice. These institutions write requests letters for work attachments for their students (Petrides, 2002). According to participants, some institutions do not write such letters.

On the other hand participants mentioned that the downfall of online learning is sometimes negated by unstable internet connections certain societies. Unstable internet connection was viewed as a huge hindrance to accessing online education. Some participants voiced out the pain of having to fail exams because of internet interruptions. Akpen et al. (2024) confirmed that internet interruptions tend to affect students' participation and attendance to online learning platforms. These interruptions negate the adoption of online platforms. There were also worries among some students that online learning increases the level of dropouts as students fail to discipline themselves and sometimes dropout because difficulty in understanding the content.

Power outages (electricity) were viewed as one other hindrance that students have to deal with sometimes. When there is no electricity students find it hard to access courses (Zahran, 2002). However, some participants publicized that they are able to use their smartphones in cases of power outages. Nonetheless, if the return of electricity is prolonged then smart phones also run out of battery power. One of the drawbacks highlighted by participants was the lack of proper online orientation on how to navigate through the course content or the institutions websites. Seemingly some institutions neglect to give proper guidelines on how to navigate their sites and this result in demotivation for students and this was portrayed to contribute to students' dropouts. Pelgrum (2001) also noted this lack of proper training which affects both students and tutors. He states that this lack of training results in

discomfort of tutors towards teaching online and also contributes to students' anxiety and avoidance of online learning, particularly among older students.

Future implications of online learning

Online learning was portrayed as relevant in the future due to the fast spread of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the modern millenials seemed to be intrigued by the technological developments. The results indicate that it is highly likely that online acceptance and adoption will increase in the near future (Permatasari and Hutabarat, 2024). According to King (2020) human preferences for personalized content are evolving. This is a trend that increases the relevancy of online learning which is very helpful in acquiring and retaining vital knowledge for students. While online learning was portrayed as relevant in the future of education, some participants stressed that there is a need to polish up relevant policies to be aligned with the increase of online learning platforms (Means et al., 2010). The findings further revealed that students must be prepared at secondary schools for online learning. The introduction of information technology subjects in secondary schools was recommended. According to some participants, they never had any prior learning of the usage of computers before venturing into online learning. This made it very difficult for them to quickly adapt to this learning platform. Rafiq et al. (2024) asserted that lack of prior exposure to technological tools have a negative impact to students adoption of online learning. There are also challenges associated with the evaluation and assessment of online learning, particularly concerning practical skills and technical competencies.

Additionally, concerns relating to plagiarism, cheating and even ascertaining if the student writing the assessment or exam is the person who registered or has asked someone else to take the exam on his or her behalf are on the rise (Osman, 2020). This is one area where institutions and policy makers need to address to enhance the integrity of online learning. The establishment and improvement of quality standards and assurance frameworks is essential for online learning. Institutions must be compelled to have quality control frameworks to ensure that their courses are widely recognized (Rizvi and Nabi, 2021). As online learning can be stressful particularly because of isolation, limited interactions with tutors and disengagement, Thakkar et al. (2024) recommend emotional intelligence support systems for students studying online. Systems like the ones powered by Affectiva, have the potential to identify signs of student distress or disengagement through the tone of voice, facial expressions prompting timely interventions to enhance the wellbeing and learning outcomes (Thakkar et al., 2024). There is a need to carry out studies that track students' experiences and perceptions over a period of time (Akpen et al., 2024). Such studies could offer deeper discernments into the changing nature of online learning, the impact of technological progressions and the long-terms effects on online learning of student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined students' perceptions of online learning models, providing valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges of these models. It also offered a comprehensive understanding of students' motivations, preferences

and future implications of online learning platforms through an exploratory lens. Participants were students who were purposively selected as they are the prime beneficiaries of this model. Their views are important in shaping adoption, enhancement and delivery of online content. The findings displayed an increase interest among learners to use online learning models. The study accentuated a high positive influence of online learning models with a positive impact on academic achievements and continued flexibility and affordability. It became evident that acceptance and adoption levels vary based on prior knowledge of the usage of technology, access to internet and students' preferences. Students' experiences also demonstrate variances, with some having good experiences and some not so good. Despite all the positive influences, online learning also has negative challenges hindering the adoption of online learning. Limited access to resources, technical difficulties and inadequate technological training emerged as the prime barriers. The findings further revealed that policy makers should make efforts to further enhance the effectiveness of online learning for present and future benefits. Institutions have to revisit evaluation or assessments of students work processes or procedures. The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature confirming the usefulness of online learning models. They will contribute in enabling institutions to enhance their online learning models and incorporate necessary alterations to meet students' needs and expectations. This study recommends the continuous development of policies to enhance access, equity and the quality of online learning. Further research which addresses improvements in quality and global acceptable standards is also recommended. Research should be tackled from different perspectives which include all stakeholders affected. There is also a need for further research to ascertain future implications of online learning models and track students' experiences and perceptions over a period of time.

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