

Lessons Learnt from Teaching Counselling and Ethics Online

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Abstract

Various global crises have intensified interest in online learning in higher education and prompted institutions to adopt innovative teaching approaches. However, the effectiveness of these online methods, particularly in disciplines such as Counselling and Ethics, remains insufficiently investigated. This reflective, evaluative study aims to examine key lessons learned from teaching Counselling and Ethics online to 60 postgraduate social work students at the University of Western Australia. The unit was designed using a blended approach that combined synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods, including pre-recorded lectures, discussion boards, and reflective journaling. This study is qualitatively informed by a social constructivist framework. A central component of this study is an evaluative inquiry addressing the research question: "How do social work students in the Counselling and Ethics unit perceive their experience of studying online at the University of Western Australia?" The 60 students enrolled in the unit were invited to evaluate the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches employed in the module. A combination of open- and closed-ended questions was used to gather students' perceptions. Additional sources, including performance statistics from the learning management system (LMS), reflective notes, and both formal and informal feedback, were also incorporated into the evaluative process. Most responses were positive, indicating that students were generally satisfied with the teaching quality and overall learning experience. The findings highlighted the value of peer review activities, the flexibility provided by pre-recorded lectures, and the positive impact of reflective journals on learning. These findings contribute to the existing literature on students' perspectives of online learning, offering fresh insights for the academic community. The study also provides practical guidance for designing and delivering online or hybrid curriculum programs in counselling and ethics.

Keywords: counselling, ethics, higher education, social work, online teaching

1. Introduction

Online education refers to the delivery of educational programs and courses through digital platforms, allowing students to complete coursework and engage in learning remotely from any location. It has evolved to include tools, resources, and learning modalities comparable to those of in-person education (Cumming & Rose, 2021). In higher education, online teaching has become an integral component of the academic landscape. Global challenges such as environmental crises, wars, economic instability, natural disasters, and difficulties in reaching remote areas have driven many academics and institutions to adopt innovative approaches and best practices in online pedagogy (Sidi et al., 2023; Henriksen et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Badia et al., 2018). However, the transition to online education has introduced various challenges for both educators and students, particularly regarding technical accessibility, engagement, and learning outcomes (Mérac et al., 2022; Kalpana & Kumar, 2021; Crawford et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2020). Research shows that educators differ in their readiness to adopt online teaching, necessitating varying levels of institutional support (Scherer et al., 2021). These challenges have prompted academic institutions to reassess their online teaching competencies, resulting in lasting transformations in teaching and learning practices (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Consequently, there has been an increased emphasis on developing educators' digital competencies to deliver lectures, facilitate discussions, manage assessments, and ensure active learning processes (Bao, 2020). The rapid expansion of online teaching in higher education, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, has also revealed considerable gaps in understanding students' experiences and perceptions of online education quality (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Addressing these gaps remains crucial for improving the future effectiveness and inclusivity of online education (Rapanta et al., 2020).

The present evaluative study examines lessons learned from teaching Counselling and Ethics online to postgraduate social work students at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the level of student engagement and satisfaction with online learning. Established in 1911, UWA is one of the leading public universities in Australia and is ranked 77th in the QS World University Rankings 2025. The Master of Social Work program aims to prepare students for employment in diverse settings and agencies (Thompson, 2020; Powell et al., 2018). Conducting evaluative research on teaching is part of UWA's commitment to excellence in education. Reflection and regular self-assessment in social work encourage the continuous development of teaching skills (Ferguson, 2023).

The research aimed to answer the question: How do social work students perceive their experience of studying Counselling and Ethics online? To address this, an anonymous online survey was conducted to gather students' views on various aspects of their learning experience. Data on class performance from the Learning Management System (LMS), along with attendance and participation statistics from online groups using Collaborate Ultra, were analyzed. The main objectives of the study were to evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of teaching the Counselling and Ethics course, contribute to the development of online or hybrid learning curricula, and inform future teaching practices involving online learning for social work students.

2. Literature Review

Calls for inclusive education that prepares students to become responsible professionals are vital to enhancing the sustainability of higher education. Universities worldwide are aligning their missions and educational objectives with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a comprehensive framework designed to address global challenges (Арсханова, 2023; Holmes et al., 2021; Molokova, 2021; Khurshid et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). In education, curricula should be structured to reflect and support the SDGs, with particular emphasis on the fourth goal, "quality education." This goal promotes inclusive education that equips students with the skills and responsibility needed to address sustainability challenges (ElMassah et al., 2021). Achieving quality teaching in higher education is a continuous process that requires educators' dedication to lifelong learning and professional development (Wood & Su, 2017). Online teaching provides flexibility and convenience for both teaching and learning (UNESCO IESALC, 2020).

Social work programs aim to equip students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills to prepare them for future professional roles and practice (Eltaiba & Ndoye 2018; Powell et al., 2018). The learning process plays a critical role in providing students with opportunities to develop and strengthen their knowledge, skills, and values (Thompson, 2020). The integration of theoretical and practical experiences should be particularly emphasised when teaching subjects that include practice-based components, such as the counselling unit.

One of the main subjects in social work curricula is Counselling and Ethics. Teaching counselling to social work students helps them develop the micro-skills necessary to build effective rapport with clients. These subtle, micro-level abilities include validation, assertiveness, assessment, intervention application, boundary setting, and the use of empathy (Appleby et al., 2020; Booyesen & Staniforth, 2017; Maidment et al.2022).

Teaching counselling to social work professionals has become increasingly important as mental health conditions rise globally, particularly in the post-pandemic period (World Health Organization, 2022). Providing counselling training requires developing knowledge and skills related to ethics and addressing moral dilemmas encountered in social work practice (Souders & Stefaniak, 2020). The responsibility of social work programs is to support students in acquiring the skills necessary for counselling and for responding to ethical challenges. Identifying strengths and gaps in online teaching contributes to improving the overall learning experience. The present reflective study is therefore pivotal in advancing the teaching of counselling and ethics.

Careful curriculum design and effective content delivery are essential (Cumming & Rose, 2021). The planned design of this study was guided by the social constructivist framework, which highlights the importance of active participation, collaborative learning, and community engagement among students (Yeravdekar, 2022; Goldingay & Boddy, 2017). Theoretical frameworks informing educational research vary, encompassing sociopolitical perspectives and dynamic models of effective teaching. The social constructivist framework qualitatively underpins this study and employs a case study approach (Singh et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2021). It emphasises collaboration, interaction, and the active construction of knowledge (Al-Rahmi, 2020). Social constructivism applies a sociological perspective to the analysis of knowledge, viewing information as socially constructed. While it does not deny the existence of objective reality, it suggests that learning and reality are mediated through individuals' perceptions, beliefs, language, and cognition. In educational contexts, social constructivist theory positions the student as the central driver of learning, viewing knowledge construction as an active process in which the student is a participant

and co-creator rather than a passive recipient (Leonard, 2002). The guiding principle was to provide students with sufficient support to engage with the content, ensuring that teaching recognised and respected their values, beliefs, strengths, and skills (Levin & Wood, 2013).

In designing the curriculum, multiple opportunities were explored to engage students and foster a genuine sense of “presence” in the online environment. To minimize the risk of screen fatigue, extended online sessions were avoided. This approach aimed to enhance teaching quality while promoting collaboration and independence among students.

Educators play a pivotal role within the educational system, serving as the primary mediators between learners and knowledge (Арсаяанова, 2023). Reflection has become an increasingly essential practice in teaching, promoting continuous professional development and improving students’ learning experiences (Matthew et al., 2017; Gould & Taylor, 2017). Regular reflection on teaching methods benefits both educators and students by ensuring relevance, adaptability, and effectiveness. The importance of reflection in education cannot be overstated. Through reflective processes, educators consciously analyze past actions, examining emotions, experiences, and outcomes—to deepen understanding and enhance professional knowledge. Reflection in teaching, often referred to as “reflective teaching,” is considered a key driver of professional growth. It involves an iterative process of examining one’s teaching practices, identifying underlying beliefs, and developing a goal-oriented approach to delivering knowledge, skills, and values (Loughran, 2002). Analyzing one’s strategies and performance in the classroom is an empowering process that fosters autonomy and accountability among educators. Moreover, regular reflection benefits students, individual professionals, and educational institutions alike. When viewed as social organizations, higher education institutions can be seen to engage in adaptive management through reflection—learning from past and present strategies to build resilience and flexibility. This is particularly vital as universities continuously adapt to an evolving socio-economic landscape.

Given the importance of reflection in teaching and its central role in social work practice, the present reflective study is pivotal for the development of modules such as the Counselling and Ethics course. Moreover, teaching counselling to social work students enhances students’ competencies in the micro-skills necessary to build effective rapport with clients (Maidment et al.2022). These subtle, micro-level abilities include validation, assertiveness, conflict management, boundary setting, and the use of empathy. Teaching counselling to social work professionals has become increasingly important as mental health conditions continue to rise globally, particularly in the post-pandemic period (World Health Organization, 2022).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection Process

This evaluative study adopts a qualitative approach and employs a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of students’ unique perceptions and the complexity of their experiences. Case study designs enable researchers to explore subjects in real-life contexts to better understand and interpret experiences and meanings (Ar & Abbas, 2021; Yin, 2018). The study also seeks to identify students’ perceptions of and satisfaction with the teaching approaches used in Counselling and Ethics.

3.2 Participants

The study employed convenience sampling, selecting participants who were readily accessible. The sample comprised postgraduate students enrolled in the Counselling and Ethics unit at the UWA. Data was collected in December 2020 and accessed for research purposes following ethical approval from the UWA Human Ethics Committee. The cohort consisted of 60 demographically diverse students, representing a range of ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and international and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the group was heterogeneous in terms of prior knowledge and experience related to the module—while most students had no prior counselling education, some held counselling degrees.

3.3 Ethics Approval

Reflective practice was utilized to examine positionality and to reduce partiality during the research process. Recording memos and discussions with colleagues was used to maintain the integrity and reliability of research (Hancock et al., 2021). The study did not involve sensitive information, and the research proposal and methodology were approved by the Human Ethics Office at UWA, reference 2020/ET000154. Furthermore, all data collection, interpretation, and presentation procedures adhered to strict confidentiality standards, with all data gathered anonymously. The information was processed in accordance with the institution's privacy and confidentiality guidelines.

3.4 Data Collection Activities

3.4.1 Design of Survey Questions

In terms of data collection methods, the evaluative study employed the following:

Online anonymous surveys were administered to students to explore various aspects of the teaching (Swathi, 2021). Microsoft Forms was used for both data collection and analysis. The development of the questionnaire items was informed by pedagogical literature on online learning and student engagement. Questions were constructed to elicit students' feedback, ensuring reporting on key domains, including content clarity, identified challenges, and the effectiveness of teaching strategies. The draft questionnaire was reviewed for clarity and face validity by academic colleagues with expertise in teaching and assessment, resulting in minor adjustments before dissemination to students.

The survey comprised 20 questions, including both open- and closed-ended items. Examples of Likert scale responses included agree, disagree, and not sure. Sample statements were: Studying in the unit motivated me to learn more about counselling; Interaction among peers enhanced my learning; Small group discussions were beneficial; The readings were relevant to the lecture topics; Discussion boards supported my learning; Counselling frameworks were well presented in class; The lecturer was supportive; and the pre-recorded lectures were well organized. Five open-ended questions invited students to provide written comments, such as What resonated with you the most in studying this unit?

3.4.2 Other Supportive Activities

Participation in discussion boards, as well as attendance and engagement in small-group discussions, were included in the data collection. These data were obtained from Collaborate Ultra, a web-based, real-time video conferencing tool developed by Blackboard and commonly used in educational settings to facilitate virtual learning and online collaboration. Additional statistics were retrieved from the LMS.

3.4.3 Data Analysis Process

Content and thematic analysis were applied to the online survey results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Microsoft Forms was used for data collection and analysis, with results generated in Excel. A thematic analysis approach was applied to explain the data. Data was coded word by word using open coding, and key themes were developed. Additionally, statistics on students' class performance, attendance, and participation in online groups (Collaborate Ultra) were analyzed using data from LMS. Attendance and participation statistics from Collaborate Ultra were also utilized. The emergent themes and interpretations were discussed with colleagues, who posed critical questions that helped refine the analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Pre-recorded Lectures

Pre-recorded lectures can be classified as asynchronous learning, a method that is both temporally and geographically flexible, primarily self-paced, and designed to support independent study (Fabriz et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2018). Although this approach lacks a social component, which may reduce students' sense of belonging (Peterson et al., 2018), asynchronous learning promotes cognitive development, reflection, and more meaningful student contributions (Ogbonna et al., 2019). By pre-recording the lectures, students attended two hours per week instead of six. Hybrid asynchronous and synchronous learning is increasingly recognized as an effective educational model (Farmer, 2021; Levin et al., 2013). The goal was to pre-record lectures while providing opportunities for students to discuss the content and readings both on the discussion board and during class sessions.

In response to the quality of pre-recorded lectures, most students provided positive feedback in the survey. The rating scale was as follows:

★ 1 – Poor: The experience or service was unsatisfactory; ★★ 2 – Fair: Some aspects were acceptable, but there were important issues; ★★★ 3 – Good: The experience was satisfactory, though with room for improvement; ★★★★ 4 – Very Good: A positive experience with only minor flaws; ★★★★★ 5 – Excellent: An exceptional experience with no significant issues.

A total of 44 students responded to the survey. The majority found the pre-recorded lectures well organized and beneficial to their learning. Most students rated the lectures as an exceptional experience with no significant issues. None of the respondents indicated that the experience or service was unsatisfactory. Two students selected that some

aspects were acceptable but that there were significant issues, while three students reported a positive experience with only minor flaws and some room for improvement. Further evidence of the importance of recorded lectures to students was obtained from LMS statistics, which showed that all students accessed the pre-recorded materials.

Reflective written feedback from the survey also indicated that students found the pre-recorded lectures helpful and practical. Many students reported that receiving the recorded lecture before the online class provided flexibility in their learning, allowing them to access the material at their convenience. One student stated, "Having pre-recorded lectures was helpful in organizing my learning," while another commented, "The pre-recorded lectures were of good quality, and the content was well organized." Additional feedback included remarks such as, "The recorded lectures were well structured."

The overall experience was regarded as enjoyable and effective.

One student remarked, "I like the pre-recorded lectures. This allows me to access them when it is convenient for me."

While most students provided positive feedback on the recorded lectures, a few expressed a preference for traditional lectures. One student commented, "Pre-recorded lectures made it harder to foster discussion," and another stated, "I prefer traditional lectures because they help me structure my studying."

While pre-recorded lectures offer self-paced learning, they also pose some engagement challenges that can reduce their effectiveness. It reduces the immediacy of communication and instant feedback. Pre-recorded materials may reduce the ability to respond dynamically to the sensitive content.

4.2 Small Group Discussion and Peer Interaction

Students were required to attend shorter weekly online sessions (two hours) via Collaborate Ultra. The decision to schedule shorter sessions aimed to minimize the potential for online fatigue caused by prolonged screen time (Bao, 2020; Halupa & Bolliger, 2020). The sessions were organized through Collaborate Ultra on the LMS Blackboard, with weekly classes made available for students to access on the designated day. Collaborate Ultra is an interactive virtual classroom platform that facilitates engagement and interaction through a range of practical tools.

These sessions were well attended by students and recorded so they could revisit the discussions when needed.

When asked whether peer interaction in group discussions enhanced their learning, the majority of students responded positively.

The rating scale was as follows: ★ Poor – The experience or service was unsatisfactory; ★★ Fair – Some aspects were acceptable, but there were significant issues; ★★★ Good – The experience was satisfactory, though with room for improvement; ★★★★ Very Good – A positive experience with only minor flaws; ★★★★★ Excellent – An exceptional experience with no significant issues. The average Rating was 4.35

Students commented positively on the group discussions, and some of these comments, collected through surveys, were as follows.

One student noted, "*I enjoyed interacting with classmates to discuss the frameworks and role-playing in class.*"

"The readings assigned to us were excellent and very practical. The small group discussions and role-plays were very helpful."

"Role-play helped me understand clients' perspectives. The examples of questions to ask the client were very useful."

Several students found interacting with peers to be challenging. Some of their comments included: "*I feel that, considering the teaching circumstances with COVID, the instructor did a great job.*"

"The fact that the unit was online—I think it would have been more beneficial if it had been on campus, as there would have been more opportunities for role-play and practice."

"When we had group discussions, and some people hadn't completed the pre-lecture materials (recorded lectures, etc.), the conversation became stagnant and felt like a waste of time."

4.3 Discussion Boards

Discussion groups were connected to the weekly assigned reading materials, and relevant YouTube resources were incorporated to enhance engagement and introduce variety into the learning process. These learning activities were designed to align with the development of knowledge and skills required to meet the learning outcomes and perform effectively in assessments. Each reading was accompanied by a reflective question for students to discuss on the discussion board. The activity design on the LMS ensured easy access.

Results from Blackboard indicated a strong level of engagement with the discussion boards, particularly given that this was a non-assessed activity (Figure 1).

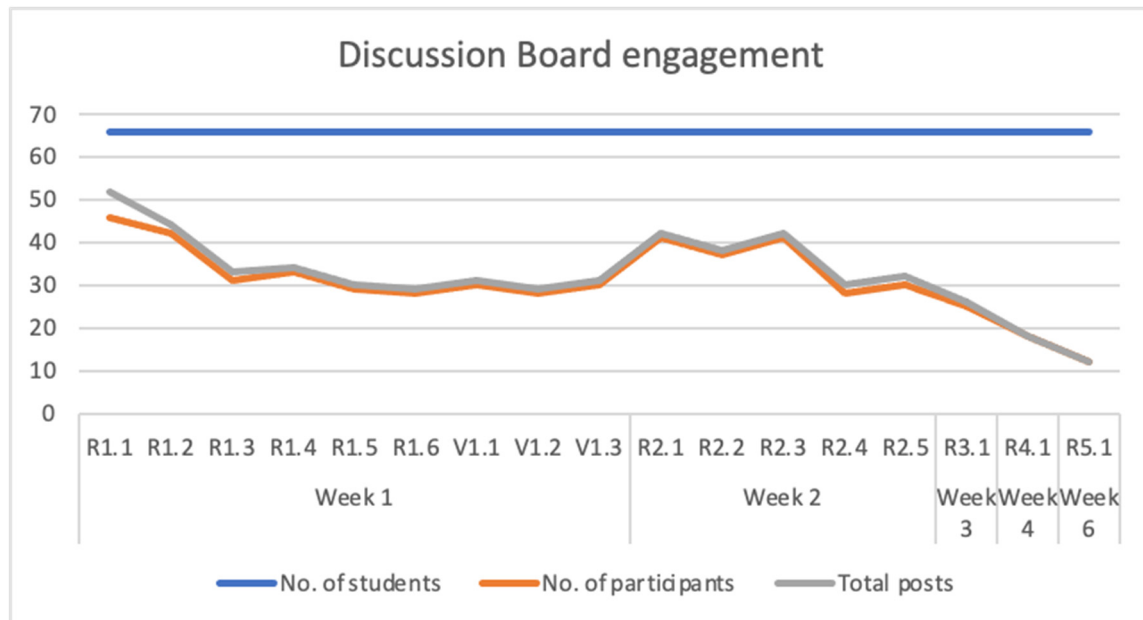


Figure 1. Discussion Board Engagement

Students actively participated in the discussion boards, which were linked to the relevant reading materials. To promote reflection and engagement with the readings, students were asked questions such as, “What resonates with you the most from the readings?”

The results showed 553 discussion board posts. Student activity was highest during the first three weeks, followed by a gradual decline in the final three weeks, likely due to increased workload and assignment deadlines in the Counselling unit and other courses. Overall, engagement with the discussion boards was highly satisfactory, particularly given that this was a non-assessed activity. The discussion boards fostered meaningful interaction and idea exchange, providing students with a space to express their perspectives. Students commented positively on the readings linked to the discussion boards:

“I like participating in the discussion board and reading other students’ perceptions.”

“The readings and other resources were well selected.”

“The readings assigned to us were good and very practical.”

However, some students felt that the number of readings was overwhelming and reported difficulties completing them within the limited timeframe:

“I think the readings were good, but too much for the time we had for this unit.”

“Could not complete all of the readings.”

“The number of readings assigned was too much.”

5. Discussion

5.1 Pre-recorded Lectures

Pre-recorded lectures were introduced to reduce the time students spent online. This format, like podcasting, offers several advantages, including greater flexibility in students’ learning experiences (Chaves-Yuste & de-la Peña, 2023). Lectures that had previously been delivered face-to-face were redesigned into shorter segments of approximately 10 minutes each and pre-recorded. The recordings were produced using Echo360 Universal Capture, which enabled the lectures to be uploaded to the LMS with clear titles and corresponding lecture dates. The lectures were made available early in the week to allow students sufficient time to access them before the next session.

Recording the lectures presented initial challenges. The unit coordinator required training in the use of the Universal Capture software after installation. Several attempts were needed to record the lectures successfully, and the process required a period of adjustment. Support from the senior educational advisor at the EEU was frequently sought. However, with continued use, the lecturer became increasingly confident and proficient in managing the recording process (Rapanta et al., 2020).

This approach was particularly important, as the module is an intensive unit delivered once a week over six weeks. It is essential to acknowledge that students often have diverse work and family commitments. In this regard, pre-recorded lectures provided valuable flexibility, enabling students to maintain a balance between their educational journey and personal responsibilities (Wood & Su, 2017). These perceptions of students align with constructivist perspectives, which highlight that knowledge is constructed through active communication, and reflection rather than passive delivery (Singh et al., 2022).

5.2 Small Group Discussion and Peer Interaction

Online sessions and lectures represent synchronous teaching approaches, characterized by real-time communication and feedback. Synchronous teaching offers several advantages, including immediate interaction, personalized engagement, and the use of natural language, which enhances social presence (Fabrizz et al., 2020) Blau et al., 2017) that aligns with the essence of social constructivist views (Al-Rahmi, 2020). It also increases students' motivation and commitment to completing tasks (Hrastinski, 2008). However, this method is less effective when deeper reflection or more complex contributions are required. Moreover, both synchronous and asynchronous online teaching present challenges related to digital preparedness and technical infrastructure (Xie et al., 2018). Each teaching method serves distinct pedagogical purposes; therefore, combining synchronous and asynchronous approaches can maximize their respective benefits and create a more holistic learning experience. In this module, sessions were held weekly from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. During these sessions, students were encouraged to ask questions about the readings and recorded lectures. Large-group sessions were structured to allow reflective responses through breakout and small-group discussions, with each group sharing its conclusions with the broader class. Tools such as whiteboards, breakout rooms, polling, and scaling were employed to enhance engagement. Attendance at these sessions was high, with students actively participating in discussions and chat. The sessions were recorded and made available for later access. Additional practice sessions were also offered at different times, focusing on activities such as role-playing, case studies, and reflective exercises, each lasting approximately one hour. Facilitating virtual sessions and maintaining student motivation proved challenging; however, the coordinator ensured that all chat messages were acknowledged and incorporated into the discussion. To strengthen the social dimension of learning, the unit was intentionally designed to encourage group discussions and peer interaction (Yeravdekar, 2022). The social aspect of education was among the most affected during online learning, as previous studies have shown that many students perceived their social relationships as "diffuse," with limited opportunities for social support (Bedenlier et al., 2020). By fostering interaction within the online learning environment, we aimed to counteract the potentially isolating effects of the pandemic. Furthermore, online activities were designed to complement the live sessions, making students' independent work more meaningful and encouraging deeper engagement with the course content.

5.3 Discussion Boards

It was recognized that there was a valuable opportunity to support further students' learning journeys (Dumford & Miller, 2018). One way to facilitate this was by providing prompt questions linked to each reading, encouraging greater engagement with the materials. Increased engagement was expected to foster stronger learning connections, ultimately enhancing students' performance in assessments. While enriching the overall learning experience, these prompt questions were also designed to develop the skills and knowledge outlined in the learning outcomes, with a particular focus on strengthening critical and analytical thinking. Additionally, this approach promoted interaction and strengthened students' sense of community (Eltaiba, 2020).

6. Summary

In designing this unit, a combination of synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods was implemented, including pre-recorded lectures, small-group discussion and peer interaction, and discussion boards. Students were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches used in this module through both open- and closed-ended questions. Additional resources, including LMS performance statistics, reflective notes, and formal and informal feedback, were also considered in the evaluation process. Most responses were positive, indicating that students were generally satisfied with the quality of teaching and their overall learning experience. The lessons

learned from this reflection highlight the benefits of peer review activities, the flexibility offered by pre-recorded lectures, and the positive learning impact of reflective journals. Furthermore, the study identified a need for continued training and ethical awareness in the use of digital tools. Moving forward, the challenges and opportunities identified through this reflective process will inform the ongoing development and delivery of future curricula. One limitation of the study is its focus on a single course at UWA and its use of a convenience sample of 60 students, which will limit generalisability to other institutions. However, the results will have practical and effective implications for similarly pedagogical contexts. Enhanced student commitment through role-play, the flexibility associated with pre-recorded lectures, and reflective learning support a broader international orientation toward blended and constructivist learning models. This will inform curriculum development and enhance quality assurance in higher education.

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