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"Teaching Through Your Fingertips": A Descriptive Study to Understand the Experiences and Needs of Online Educators in Postgraduate Nursing Education in Australia

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Abstract

Introduction: Even before COVID-19, enrolments in online postgraduate nursing and midwifery courses were growing globally. Teaching into planned online courses requires pedagogical considerations unique to the context.
Objective: The objective of this descriptive mixed methods study was to understand the experiences and needs of Australian online educators who taught into planned online postgraduate nursing or midwifery courses.
Methods: A 55-item online survey captured the experiences and needs of participants. This paper reports on the analysis of participants' qualitative responses in this survey, analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Forty-nine postgraduate educators participated in this study.
Results: Five core themes were identified: time is precious; redefining the educator role; understanding the pedagogical shift; online and alone; and learning to teach online. Many educators report lacking the skills and confidence to deliver high-quality education to postgraduate students through their fingertips.
Conclusion: This research highlighted that online educators need support through resources, education, and professional development.

Keywords

faculty education, faculty experience, nursing faculty, distance education, postgraduate nursing education, teaching methods, online teaching

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Introduction

The growing uptake of online learning across universities as an option for students to undertake studies without having to attend a physical campus is undeniable (Richardson et al., 2020). The unexpected arrival of the global COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 saw education providers across the globe suddenly forced to reconsider the ways in which they delivered education because of government-enforced restrictions on gatherings of people in any circumstance (Bessette, 2020). To comply with physical distancing requirements and stay-at-home orders, most universities around the world were forced to transfer all coursework from the traditional face-to-face (F2F) mode to online, remote, or distance learning (Pather et al., 2020). Those who were already teaching in the digital classroom were streaks ahead of the "fast and furious shift to online education" (Smadi et al., 2021a, p. 47). Where once there was staunch opposition to teaching and learning in the online "classroom" in many disciplines, there was now no other option available. Those institutions that weren't already delivering

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online education faced the enormous challenge of reconceptualizing curricula and evaluation of learning (Morin, 2020).

Review of the Literature

It is prudent to start with a definition of what is commonly understood by online education. Singh and Thurman (2019) conducted a systematic review of definitions of online learning and education to create an agreeable definition as they observed that definitions varied, did not consider the wide contexts and forms that online learning may take, and/or may not have kept abreast with the evolution of the pedagogy. As a result of their review, the authors proposed a definition of online education that encompassed the varied contexts of learning:

> Online education is defined as education being delivered in an online environment through the use of the internet for teaching and learning. This includes online learning on the part of the students that is not dependent on their physical or virtual co-location. The teaching content is delivered online and the instructors develop teaching modules that enhance learning and interactivity in the synchronous or asynchronous environment (Singh & Thurman, 2019, p. 302).

A literature review was conducted to discover published work that explored the perceived needs and experiences of educators who taught into planned postgraduate online nursing and midwifery courses in Australian higher education prior to 2020. This review of the literature discovered very little work had been done in this area in this country prior to pandemic. Literature predominantly centered on the student experience of online learning in both undergraduate and postgraduate nursing and midwifery courses. Literature that did focus on educators examined the experiences of those who taught into undergraduate courses. These international studies reported on topics like self-efficacy (Richter & Idleman, 2017), educator satisfaction (Gazza, 2017; Howe et al., 2018; Reneau et al., 2018), educator presence (Claywell et al., 2016), innovations in online education (Matthias et al., 2019), and educator practices/skills/knowledge (Broussard & Wilson, 2018; Richter & Schuessler, 2019; Smith & Crowe, 2017). What was missing from the literature in both Australia and globally was a comprehensive educator perspective of teaching and preparation for planned teaching in the online postgraduate nursing and midwifery context. This study provides a snapshot into the experiences and needs of educators who were already teaching in the online milieu at a time when the online classroom was not as universally practiced as it is now that educational institutions are learning to live with COVID-19.

Methods

Study Design and Ethical Considerations

This study used a descriptive mixed methods design to investigate the needs and experiences of nursing and midwifery educators teaching into postgraduate courses offered entirely online. Ethics approval was sought and received from the researchers' institution's Human Research Ethics Committee. Participant confidentiality was assured as no identifying information was collected in any form. Any information within the data that could potentially allude to a particular institution or person was redacted before analysis began. Participants were advised that their consent to participate was implied by commencing the survey and they could cease answering the survey at any stage and their data would not be included in the final analysis. Data were collected and stored electronically, with password protection used for security. Only the researchers had access to this data.

Research Objective

The objectives of this study were to understand the experiences and needs of Australian educators at one point in time who were teaching into planned online nursing and midwifery postgraduate courses, and to inform strategies to be implemented to support this population as they undertake their teaching roles.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences and needs of nursing and midwifery educators teaching into postgraduate courses offered entirely in an online mode?
2. What strategies can be implemented to support nursing and midwifery educators who teach postgraduate courses offered entirely online?

Sample and Recruitment

To be eligible for this study, participants needed to have been employed full-time, part-time, or on a casual/sessional basis as an educator in a fully online postgraduate nursing or midwifery course/program/subject/unit in an Australian university within the preceding 5 years.

The approach to recruitment was two-fold. First, Deans or Heads of Australian university nursing and midwifery schools that offered postgraduate online courses were contacted via email with a request to disseminate an information sheet about this study to eligible staff within their school or discipline. Second, a recruitment campaign using three social media platforms, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook, invited eligible educators to participate, with a link to the information sheet and survey provided. Recruitment occurred in mid-2019.

Instrument

An online survey was used to gather data. In the development of this instrument, face validity and clarity were assessed by nine academics in both health and non-health disciplines, and items were amended based on the information received during this testing phase (principally suggesting enhancements to clarity of two questions, more space for qualitative responses, and the provision of a progress bar).

The online survey, hosted in Qualtrics, consisted of 55 questions allowing for both quantitative (mostly Likert-style questions) and qualitative, optional open-ended responses. The findings from the quantitative component of the responses to this study have been published (Author, 2021). The survey offered 13 opportunities for participants to leave qualitative responses as a means to expand on or explain their quantitative responses to questions about personal experiences relating to their preparedness to teach online, support provided by their employer and colleagues, perceptions about what is needed to successfully teach online, and their lessons learned from teaching online.

Data Collection

We emphasize that all data were collected prior to March 2020, when the global COVID-19 pandemic impacted upon higher education in Australia. All potential participants were provided with a weblink to the study's information sheet. This information sheet explained the purpose and aims of the study and outlined all ethical and practical issues, such as voluntary participation, withdrawing without any repercussions, anonymity and confidentiality, management of data, and planned dissemination of findings. Access to the survey was provided when participants selected "Start" at the end of the information sheet and consent was implied by starting the survey. The survey took an average of 25 min to complete, and the survey remained open for 2 months during the data collection phase.

Table 1. Overview of Findings.

Theme	Subthemes
Time is precious	Time for developing content
	Time to teach
	Time to learn
	Time to prepare
	Time to evaluate
	Time to grow
Redefining the educator role	Not "real teaching"
	What teaching online looks like
	Different type of engagement with students
Understanding the pedagogical shift	Pedagogy differences
	Misunderstanding within the academy
	Treatment of curricula
	Different tools for teaching
Online and alone	Loneliness and isolation
	Support and collegiality
	Asynchronicity and engagement
	Meeting student demands
Learning to teach online	Skills for the online classroom
	Technological challenges
	Training and development opportunities

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were downloaded into Excel™ and manually organized according to the main topics of the survey questions: general perceptions about teaching online, using technology for online teaching, preparing for teaching and learning, online teaching strategies and student engagement, training and support for online teaching, and opportunities for developing as an online educator. Responses were read multiple times and tables were created to assist with a visual and contextual interpretation to assist in the creation of themes, using a constant comparative technique (Leech & Onweugbuzie, 2007). An initial coding schema was developed and, using pattern coding to "cluster" codes, refined into higher-order themes that provided an interpretation of the codes. Further re-reading of the participant responses occurred until the researchers were comfortable that the themes adequately and appropriately conceptualized the data and no further themes were evident, suggesting data saturation. The following discussion of the results relates to the findings of this analysis.

Results

Sample Characteristics

A total of 49 educators participated in this study. One-third of the participants indicated they had been teaching in higher education for more than 10 years, with a further one-quarter indicating they had been teaching in higher education for less than 4 years. Almost three-quarters of the participants rated themselves as "proficient" or "expert" as educators in the F2F setting. By way of comparison, half of the participants rated themselves as "proficient" or "expert" as online educators.

Five key themes were identified in the analysis of the qualitative data: (a) *time is precious*; (*b*) *re-defining the educator role*; (c) *understanding the pedagogical shift*; (*d*) *online and alone*; and (*e*) *learning to teach online*. The subthemes that informed the development of these five themes are presented in Table 1. The following description of each theme includes exemplars from participant responses to help contextualize the themes.

Theme 1: Time is Precious. A key theme found centered on the valuable commodity of time in the online space. Participants reported that time needed to develop content, prepare for, and conduct online teaching is underestimated by their employer and the educator themselves. Participants reported frequently feeling as though there is never enough time to complete all necessary tasks to keep an online course running smoothly, meeting university governance requirements, provide education, create teaching artefacts and content, mark assessments, as well as fill their own knowledge gaps and be available to students, seemingly around the clock. Several participants described online teaching as significantly more time intensive than many educators or employers realize. For example, one participant wrote:

> *There is a tradeoff for flexibility, as you are accessible all of the time. You might be answering emails at midnight or marking [after hours]. Sometimes the time you invest is not always recognised because it may not be in standard [business] hours. As a casual, this can be difficult as you get paid for what is seen to be the hours needed but this might not be an accurate reflection of what it takes to work in an online system.*

Participants reported taking time away from "the classroom" is difficult when it is literally in the palm of their hands on their smart phone or tablet device or on their computer in the next room. For many participants, the temptation to answer emails or respond to students in discussion forums around the clock was high. One participant noted "*it can be very easy to never switch off. This is something I have gotten better at – actually setting boundaries and having a day off when I don't look at emails*." As students in postgraduate nursing and midwifery courses are generally employed themselves as clinicians in most cases, the times when they want staff support and engagement is frequently outside usual business hours, so educators feel pressure by the expectations of their organization and their own professional dedication as educators to put student experience first.

Conversely, some participants acknowledged the flexibility afforded by online teaching is a major benefit, noting that educators can often fit this around their other commitments. In responding to a question about their favorite aspect of online teaching, one participant wrote:

> *Flexibility in the 'when' and 'where' of my teaching. [I] can teach from anywhere and still stay connected to my students and the content. [Online teaching] enables flexibility in work/rest rhythms as well, as I age and manage health concerns.*

Theme 2: Re-Defining the Educator Role. This theme illustrated the ways in which educators saw their role as an educator or teacher in the online classroom. Numerous participants suggested teaching online "*doesn't actually feel like teaching*." Rather, they saw their role as that of an "*information booth attendant*" who simply answered student questions, fixed students' technology problems, and marked student papers, making the experience professionally unsatisfying when compared to their experience in the F2F context. For many participants, a sense of connectivity between themselves and their students was noticeably absent in the online classroom: "*…because it's asynchronous, you never feel like you get to know the students well enough. A lot of them just never engage so you never know if they are learning the content or just doing the assignments to pass the subjects*." Another participant described a sense of futility at the perceived shift in their role as an educator:

> *[I feel] like a Q&A host rather than a teacher. I want to impart knowledge, help students grow. All I feel like I am doing is answering questions about formatting assignments or extensions or other non-teaching things. And when we offer teaching opportunities, nobody shows up.*

Numerous participants reported they preferred teaching in the traditional F2F classrooms because they believed they could "*better engage with students*" and it was "*more fulfilling*" as an educator. One participant declared: "*I find that online teaching is not that satisfying, as [it's] difficult to develop meaningful relationships with students*." This shift in educator role to one that was felt to be non-teaching was clearly an issue for many participants in this study and contributed to self-reports of professional dissatisfaction with teaching in the online classroom.

Theme 3: Understanding the Pedagogical Shift. This theme centered on the ways in which the participants perceived how teaching and learning occurs in the online classroom. Participants almost unanimously indicated there is a significant global misunderstanding of the pedagogical differences between teaching in the traditional F2F setting and the online space. Some participants who are involved in the development of online learning curricula reported their employer assumed it was a "*simple process*" to shift what is taught in the traditional F2F setting into an online classroom. One participant indicated the most disappointing aspect of their role as an online educator was the "*lack of recognition of the …[amount of] work to deliver quality online teaching*."

One participant reported the pedagogy of online teaching is "*incompatible with the kinds of teaching tools*" used in the traditional F2F model. Some participants indicated they couldn't use the same approaches to teaching and learning they knew worked in their traditional classrooms because it was not easily transferable. For example, one participant disclosed: "*I am very much a F2F teacher and enjoy the immediate interaction with students. I often teach by storytelling and I find it difficult to translate this into online learning.*" Such approaches were further challenged if online teaching and learning is asynchronous or impacted by limited

student engagement. Another participant reported they tried to incorporate high-quality self-directed learning experiences into their online teaching "… *but [students] are too lazy to find answers themselves*."

Participants reported using a variety of tools to encourage online engagement between students and educators to create and forge a sense of a community of inquiry (CoI) and replicate the interactions of the F2F classroom. However, numerous participants indicated that these were not used by students as effectively as it was envisioned when they were created. Some participants suggested those students who would benefit most from these communities of inquiry were least likely to engage with them, and this was a source of frustration. One participant noted:

> *In a F2F classroom, it is more evident who these students are because of their body language or obvious disengagement, so you can invite them to participate in discussions. However, this is not possible in the online classroom, where willingness to engage is student dependent.*

Theme 4: Online and Alone. This theme explores the experience of online teaching experienced by many of the participants in this study. For most participants, the experience of teaching in the online classroom is reported as one of loneliness and isolation. The majority of participants described working alone with limited support or engagement with other staff, whilst only a small number of participants reported they worked as part of a teaching team, which contributed to a sense of support and community. Peer support and engagement with other online educators was suggested as vital for professional development, but this was not formally offered. Intensive marking periods were highlighted as being a major contributor to a sense of loneliness for participants as this often occurred in isolation from other staff. Another participant suggested that because online learning often occurs outside regular working hours, even full-time educators feel isolated when working on evenings or weekends while the rest of their university colleagues are not contactable.

Engagement with students, or rather the lack of student engagement, in the online classroom was reported by several participants to be a noteworthy contributor to the sense of loneliness of the online classroom. Some participants explained they attempted to engage students deeply with the content but reticence on behalf of students to reciprocate and engage fully further enhanced the sense of loneliness and distance for the educator. One participant noted "*it is difficult to get to know students when only marking [their] assignments*." This disconnect from the interpersonal human dimension of teaching and learning appeared to frustrate numerous participants. One participant disclosed that their least favorite aspect of their role as an online educator was:

> *Not having F2F contact with all the students as some do not even attempt to come to collaborative sessions yet complain that you aren't available or approachable. …[h]aving them complain when they fail [even though] they did not participate in study sessions [is frustrating].*

Theme 5: Learning to Teach Online. The final theme identified in the data illustrates the challenges faced and strategies utilized to learn to be an online educator. Participants new to online teaching reported there is not enough time allocated to "learn" how to teach online. Many participants reported having to "*teach myself how to teach online*" and to "*learn as we go,*" as opposed to receiving any formal training to prepare them for the online classroom. This was especially evident in those participants who identified themselves as casual or sessional educators. Very few participants described feeling prepared to teach online, and cited what training was provided by their institution focused on F2F classrooms practices, wasn't specific to their needs, or occurred during university business hours, which didn't fit in with their other working arrangements. Several participants reported willingly seeking out learning opportunities to improve their knowledge of online pedagogies in their own time and of their own initiative and cost. Some participants reported training offered by their employer is often "*too generic or irrelevant to my actual work*" and does little to assist them learning to manage the day-to-day issues that arise in the online postgraduate classroom.

Participants provided numerous examples of the areas of technical training they would benefit from, including greater information technology problem solving skills, implementing advanced tools in their learning management system, contemporary learning design tools to improve content delivery, graphic design, and using analytics to improve their understanding of specific student needs. Other participants suggested they needed further professional development to improve their online presence as an educator. Of utmost importance for participants, however, was the desire that this professional development should not always come at a personal cost, financially or personally.

Discussion

The sharp shift from traditional methods of F2F teaching of postgraduate education to online methods in higher education in recent years has seen experienced F2F educators forced to quickly adopt their practice to suit online learning environments. Learning management systems (LMS) used in universities to administer courses provide the tools necessary for educators to develop and deliver effective and interactive online learning environments. These online learning environments use methods such as text-based content, video-based content, e-tivities, discussion boards, padlets, and other collaboration applications as well as online videoconferencing to engage students to interact with the online content, their peers, and their teaching staff. However, many educators

both in Australia and worldwide generally underutilize these features, challenged by a lack of skill and capacity in the mechanics of creating learning artefacts in the LMS (El-Soussi, 2022; Haslam, 2021; Smadi et al., 2021b) and a lack to time to create engaging learning artefacts and resources (Gani & van den Berg, 2019; Kite et al., 2020). These challenges were also reported by some participants in this study even though their experiences occurred before forced and unplanned online teaching driven by the global pandemic, emphasizing the need for greater acknowledgement of the importance of this ongoing issue for staff.

In this study, key areas of the pedagogical shift were identified by postgraduate nursing and midwifery educators as challenging when compared to F2F teaching. Firstly, a dissonance of online pedagogical understanding exists at multiple levels of higher education, from faculty through to university administration (Gazza, 2022). In our study, participants noted they were expected to simply shift the traditional classroom content to an online format without adequate acknowledgment of the pedagogical difference between F2F teaching and online teaching. This compares with numerous studies in other parts of the world reporting the challenges encountered with the swift shift from F2F teaching to online teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Banack et al., 2021; Daumiller et al., 2021; El-Soussi, 2022; Haslam, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Tartavulea et al., 2020). This is suggestive of a widespread and ongoing issue that warrants deeper exploration.

Secondly, the asynchronous aspect of teaching online presented challenges to educators who enjoyed F2F collaboration and interpersonal engagement with their students, being able to be within reach of students, see them interact and engage physically, read their body language, note their facial expressions and act immediately on all these indicators to modify teaching approaches to enhance learning. Connection with students in an online environment is unique and many educators find connecting with online students presents a great challenge (Gazza, 2017; Gribble & Wardrop, 2021; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Puksa & Janzen, 2020). Educators see there is a direct relationship between their own engagement and presence with student engagement and success, and this is most important in the online environment where there is no direct human contact (Gazza, 2017; Smith & Crowe, 2017). To demonstrate effective presence and build strong relationships with online learners, educators need to create a well-considered strategy for engagement (Smith et al., 2021). Yet, educators new to the academy or to online teaching may not yet have the skills and knowledge to anticipate a strategy for engagement, or indeed understand readiness to teach through their fingertips (Cutri & Mena, 2020). Without this preparation, educators are at a disadvantage professionally and pedagogically.

Another challenge identified in this study included the time, labor, and effort invested to create and sustain effective teaching practices while acquiring new methods to engage their learners so as to continue to deliver high-quality learning experiences. Notwithstanding the underestimation of academic labor required for online teaching reported internationally (Haslam, 2021; Kenny & Fluck, 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Miller, 2019), the investment of time and effort required to engage in online teaching may not be reflected in the usual rewards of student interaction and engagement found in the traditional classroom vis-à-vis the happy, animated students leaving the classroom buoyed and challenged by their new knowledge (Dalby et al., 2020; Pather et al., 2020). The absence of this experience has been shown to lead to adverse impacts on educator satisfaction in Australian and international studies (Author, 2021; Bittner & Bechtel, 2017; Dalby et al., 2020; Elshami et al., 2021; Hampton et al., 2020; Howe et al., 2018; Marasi et al., 2022). Participants in this study reported the timeframes and estimates provided by their institution to prepare their teaching material and to teach and engage with students were not realistic or evidence based. For sessionally-employed educators, the expectation they should be willing to undertake unpaid preparation work in their own time is seen by participants as unreasonable but inevitable because of the high levels of job insecurity that exist in Australia's higher education sector (Richardson et al., 2021). Likewise, educators employed in permanent positions expressed dissent that their employer doesn't appreciate or acknowledge that online teaching and learning often occurs outside usual business hours, assuming educators will willingly work their usual hours as well as outside business hours to support the online course and students. Reliance upon an educators' intrinsic motivation to support students and provide an optimal learning experience whilst not adequately addressing an extrinsic drive such as appropriate remuneration is echoed by Crawford and Germov (2015), Leathwood and Read (2022), and Richardson et al., (2021). The challenge for managers and employers is to recognize this shift from "the old ways" and ensure casual and permanent staff are supported and compensated appropriately.

The existing published literature clearly identifies online pedagogy as distinct from F2F pedagogy (Gazza, 2017), with scaffolds such as the CoI framework being used to underpin online teaching and learning practices (Garrison et al., 2010; Smadi et al., 2019). To achieve best practice for online teaching and learning, institutions must recognize the clear pedagogical shift required of online educators for successful teaching and student learning. Of great importance is the professional development required to adequately equip online educators with an astute understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of online education, especially for postgraduate students, as well as the technological skills required to perform their role (Gazza, 2022), whilst also allocating resources required to adapt teaching methods to suit the online learning environment.

Strengths and Limitations

This descriptive study explored the experiences of participants who identified as meeting the eligibility criteria through a self-reporting survey. This method of data collection may not have captured as full and robust qualitative responses that could have been gained through alternative qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews. The focus of the study was limited to Australian nursing and midwifery postgraduate courses. It would be useful to conduct this study internationally to understand the experiences around the globe to discover shared areas of concern and lessons learned. Likewise, this study occurred just prior to the global shift of education to online learning platforms secondary to COVID-19. As such, eligible participants were from a smaller subset of educators at that time. Replicating this study now that online education has rapidly evolved to being almost a 'new normal' for many educators and students globally would provide an ideal opportunity to compare and contrast the needs and experiences of online educators to determine ongoing issues.

Implications for Education

All these experiences and needs have an impact on educator experience and satisfaction. The implications of the findings of this study are of importance for nursing education, but also for employers, managers, and the wider academy. It is vital that educators are provided with training, education, and support that is appropriate and relevant to their particular needs as online educators. It is equally as important to ensure educators are satisfied in the virtual classroom, as this may have ramifications for the quality and success of programs and the intention to remain in the profession of education. If the transition of the education of nurses and midwives is inevitably going to become more omnipresent in the digital classroom, and educators are going to be expected to teach "through their fingertips" more and more frequently, the needs of educators must be addressed as a priority.

Employers, managers, and administrators must not assume the digital classroom is merely a replication of the F2F classroom, and educators must champion the education and professional development of themselves and their colleagues to ensure they are competent and confident in performing their vital role. Opportunities exist for organizations to ensure their online teaching staff are adequately trained and appropriately resources with time and professional development. Future research is warranted that explores ways to provide ongoing support educators in the digital classroom, as well as what can be done to inculcate a new generation of educators, so they are better prepared and supported to meet the needs of online learners. This study shows us the most important act employers can do for their online postgraduate educators is to give them the resources, education, and professional development they crave.

Conclusion

This study occurred before the major shift of learning from F2F to the online space in 2020, where fewer educators taught in an entirely online classroom. The experiences and needs of online educators in postgraduate courses were relatively unexplored in the scholarly literature at that time, especially amongst those who taught in postgraduate nursing and midwifery courses. The online classroom challenges the long-held notion of the educator role for many online educators as the "sage on the stage," particularly those who are comfortable with more didactic or traditional forms of education delivery. Online educators need to use alternative methods to connect with, engage, and educate online postgraduate learners which are quite different to those used in the traditional classroom. There is a consistent challenge for educators and their employers to understand that teaching through one's fingertips is not the same as teaching in a traditional classroom, and there are new skills, techniques, and practices that must be learned to deliver a robust, quality education program, whilst meeting the needs of learners. For many postgraduate educators in nursing and midwifery, the online classroom is lonely, isolating, and can be all-consuming, with students expecting support around the clock. Armed with this knowledge, we can ensure those staff are supported and educated to not just provide postgraduate students with the optimal learning experience, but to also find a greater sense of professional satisfaction in their important role as educators of nurses and midwives. Online learning is arguably here to stay. Supporting our educators to provide optimal learning experiences to postgraduate nurses and midwives is not just a "nice to have," but rather, it is an obligation.

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