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Navigating the virtual classroom: unveiling the experiences and challenges of Australian psychology educators in online programs

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ABSTRACT

In the evolving landscape of education, understanding the experiences of Australian psychology educators in online programmes is crucial for enhancing educational strategies. The increased emphasis on psychology education, particularly online, post-COVID-19, highlights the crucial role of the degree meeting rising mental health needs. This is supported by the Australian governmental focus on STEM and employability, as psychology programmes equip students with essential skills for the workforce, necessitating strong tertiary programmes. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to explore the experiences and needs of Australian psychology educators teaching in online programmes in the last five years and to suggest strategies to address their perceived needs. A survey of 75 Australian online psychology educators revealed that while online teaching presented advantages for educators (e.g. autonomy, and motivation to learn new technologies), educators also found online teaching isolating and time-consuming. The challenges of engaging students online also emerged as a dominant theme. Additionally, the study highlighted the need for tailored support, specifically in the psychology discipline, with over 80% of the respondents agreeing that they could be better supported as online teachers. As the demand for online education grows, this study underscores the need for targeted support structures to empower educators, ensuring they continue to create enriched learning experiences for their students in virtual environments.

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Introduction

There is a growing trend for online course offerings in higher education. Whether driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, student demand, or the increased capacity for technologies to be used in innovative ways to deliver content, this transition has allowed universities to broaden their offerings (Roddy et al. 2017). This growth in online learning has resulted in further staffing implications for universities.

There is mixed support for courses to transition to fully online modes (Mandernach et al. 2012; Tanner, Noser, and Totaro 2009). Many educators are experienced face-to-face teachers and report that the shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching is challenging and requires a different skillset and approach (El-Soussi 2022; Rapanta et al. 2021). A review of literature investigating the

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experience of academics teaching in online psychology courses has revealed that academics have a range of specific needs to prepare them for the online classroom, including technological training, mentoring, and ongoing support (Drugas 2020; Sepp et al. 2022). The challenges in this new teaching space reportedly affect staff and student satisfaction (Drugas 2020), underscoring the need for targeted training and support for educators.

Research on the needs of Australian online educators, particularly in psychology, is scarce. The aims of this study are to understand the learning and professional needs of Australian psychology educators teaching into online programmes, and to suggest strategies to address the needs of this population. The current paper builds on the work conducted by Ahern and Biedermann (2022), who developed a survey instrument to examine the experiences and needs of Australian online nursing academics. The current paper first presents a brief literature review of the relevant literature and highlights the additions made to methods used by Ahern and Biedermann (2022). Then, we present a discussion that examines the needs and experiences of online psychology educators including recommendations for strategies suitable for academics in this context.

Literature review

Online education has transformed tertiary learning, accelerated by digital advancements and the COVID-19 pandemic. Students and institutions alike are increasingly embracing virtual classrooms for their technological, economic, and operational benefits (Palvia et al. 2018). In fact, between 2017 and 2022, the online education industry in Australia has grown 8.7% on average per year (IBISWorld 2023). This rapid uptake has not only increased access to education, making it more inclusive for individuals from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations, but it has also provided flexibility that accommodates the busy lives of contemporary learners and educators (Roddy et al. 2017). As universities continue to invest in new technologies, instructional design, and remote learning infrastructure, it is clear that online education has become an integral and permanent component of the higher education context.

While online education has undoubtedly placed a strong emphasis on learner-centric approaches Katsarou and Chatzipanagiotou (2021), there has been comparatively less focus on supporting educators as they navigate this dynamic learning environment. As technology continues to evolve and shape the way students access information and engage with content, educators face the challenge of adapting their teaching methods and strategies to effectively engage and guide learners (Brooks and Grajek 2020). In this context, the role of an online educator extends beyond content delivery. Education in this space requires skills and expertise in online pedagogy, coordinating vast student cohorts, the understanding and use of digital tools, the ability to monitor student progression in a virtual setting, a necessary focus on fostering meaningful (virtual) interactions, as well as maintaining engagement, and sustaining subject and overall course retention – all of which are challenges to even the best educators (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago 2017; Tondeur et al. 2023).

Post-COVID-19 online education growth has highlighted further challenges for academics. For example, Ahmad et al. (2020) highlighted challenges faced by academics teaching large online cohorts, including time constraints, platform limitations, mismatched expectations, student pressures, and collaboration difficulties. In online nursing education, Ahern and Biedermann (2022) found educators seeking more institutional support and training to assist them to effectively undertake their role as online educators.

Online educators often find themselves caught in a challenging dilemma between the need to adapt to new educational technologies and finding the time to learn and master them. As a result, they might not be proficient in the use of these tools, hindering their ability to create engaging and effective learning environments for students, ultimately affecting the quality of education provided (Sato et al. 2023). Additionally, educators may miss out on opportunities to leverage the full potential of these tools for personalised learning experiences. Such challenges for educators teaching in online environments have been reported to result in faculty members not supporting courses

transitioning to online modes (Mandernach et al. 2012; Tanner, Noser, and Totaro 2009), a decrease in job satisfaction more broadly (Drugas 2020) and feelings of isolation (Ahern and Biedermann 2022). With online learning here to stay, it is imperative to explore ways in which we, as educational bodies, can support staff to ensure this mode of teaching is effective and sustainable.

Whilst such considerations are of focus to online courses, of specific examination is that of online psychology course educators. The profession of psychology and its growth in tertiary education have gained heightened significance, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the importance of well-trained mental health professionals became even more apparent (Davey 2021).

Traditionally, psychology education in Australia follows a scientist-practitioner model with an aim to produce psychologists who can apply existing knowledge in clinical practice and effectively evaluate programmes and interventions (Provost et al., 2010). The four-year undergraduate programme covers diverse areas (e.g. cognitive psychology, social psychology, research methods and statistics) and includes a final-year research project (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2019). Postgraduate studies, required for professional registration, focus on supervised clinical training.

Furthermore, as part of Australian governmental intervention to educate students to make them more 'employable' post-COVID-19, the Liberal-National coalition in 2020 proposed a revision of the fee structure of degree courses, emphasising training in STEM subjects, like psychology (Innes and Morrison 2022). This move again highlights the necessity of employable and well-trained graduates. Psychology degrees are instrumental in producing a skilled workforce equipped to address the growing mental health needs of individuals and communities. Moreover, psychology as a field has seen an increased demand across various sectors, including healthcare, education, the environment, and in workplace settings, further emphasising the necessity of quality tertiary education programmes that produce competent professionals.

Current study

In addition to understanding the needs of online educators in general, it is crucial to examine the specific requirements of online psychology educators for several reasons. First, the teaching of psychology generally relies heavily on interactive discussions and experiential learning. This clearly makes the transition to the online environment challenging. At the time of writing, online psychology courses have grown at a rapid rate, with 24 out of 43 universities in Australia now offering some kind of online option (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council 2023). Understanding the unique requirements and challenges faced by online psychology educators, which are now becoming the norm for this discipline, is essential to ensuring students receive high-quality education that mirrors the depth of traditional in-person modes. Secondly, the mental health and well-being of both educators and students in the psychology field are crucial considerations. The added stressors online learning technologies bring can impact the effectiveness and mental health of educators, ultimately affecting the quality of teaching delivered (Badiozaman 2021).

By addressing the specific needs of online psychology educators, we argue that institutions can promote healthier, more supportive, and successful learning environments in a profession where this notion is at its very core. Lastly, recognising and catering to the needs of online psychology educators might contribute to not only psychology programmes themselves but the overall advancement of online education. The insights gained from the current study could be extended to disciplines other than psychology.

To ensure the success of online education, specifically in the discipline of psychology, it is imperative that institutions invest in ongoing support for educators, recognising that their ability to navigate this evolving landscape is essential in creating effective online learning experiences for students. Therefore, two questions have been proposed and form the basis of the current study:

- 1: *What are the experiences and needs of online educators in the psychology discipline?*
- 2: *What strategies can be implemented to support psychology educators teaching in online modes?*

Method

Participants

The current sample consisted of 75 Australian academics who had taught an undergraduate, or postgraduate psychology, or psychological science programme online in the last five years. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 64 years ($M = 41.46$, $SD = 9.30$), and the majority of the sample identified as female (61.3%), 37.3% identifying as male, and one participant as non-binary.

Respondents indicated they had been teaching in higher education, on average, for 12 years ($M = 12.30$, $SD = 7.67$). When teaching online, 73.3% of the sample were full-time employees, 14.7% part-time, and 33.3% casual/sessional (noting that more than one option could be selected). In these positions, 82.7% of the sample were employed as lecturers, 52% as course coordinators, and 32% as tutors (noting more than one option could be selected). Forty-four per cent of the sample had taught in an online psychology programme prior to COVID-19 in 2020.

Data collection

Participants were recruited via social media (LinkedIn, Twitter), institution media channels (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) and via word of mouth. Thirty-seven Australian universities who offered Psychology courses (and had appropriate course contact information), were identified and Heads/Deans of all universities were contacted with an invitation to disseminate the study information sheet and survey link to appropriate staff. Potential participants were provided with a link to the Information Sheet and if they agreed to participate, participants were invited to complete an online anonymous survey via the Qualtrics platform. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete and was open for data collection from December 2022 until April 2023. Ethical approval was obtained through the James Cook University Human Ethics Committee (approval number H8943).

Materials

A 79-item quantitative and qualitative survey was used to gather data. This instrument was adapted from the measure developed by Ahern and Biedermann (2022), replacing all mentions of 'Nursing and Midwifery' terminology with 'Psychology'. In brief, the original measure development consisted of the survey being tested using nine academics in both health and non-health disciplines to assess face validity and clarity. The final survey comprised of four sections and is located in the [Appendix](#).

Demographic information

The first section asked participants general demographic data such as age and gender, and were additional inclusions to the original instrument developed by Ahern and Biedermann (2022). This section also included one numerical question regarding respondents' length of time teaching in higher education, another asking whether respondents had taught online prior to COVID-19, as well as two questions regarding participant employment type (full-time, part-time, casual/sessional) and position (lecturer, tutor, course coordinator, etc.). The questions regarding pre-COVID-19 experience, employment type and position were additional questions to the original instrument developed by Ahern and Biedermann (2022). Additionally, three questions asked about respondents' experience teaching in face-to-face, online and blended modes. These questions used a 5-point Likert scale developed by Benner (1984) where 1=*novice*, and 5=*expert*. The question regarding blended modes

of teaching was also an addition to the original instrument developed by Ahern and Biedermann (2022). At the end of each sub-set of questions, participants were encouraged to explain their choices to Likert scale responses via the question: *'Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions'*.

Online teaching experience

Section two included 37 questions related to understanding respondents online teaching experiences. These questions used a 5-point Likert scale where 1=*strongly disagree*, and 5=*strongly agree*. In this section, one additional question was added to the original measure developed by Ahern and Biedermann (2022), which was *'I develop my learning materials well in advance of my teaching'*. This was added as there was no dedicated question to adequate preparation of self-developed teaching materials. Additionally, another question was added that clarified the type of video conferencing sessions offered by educators. The original question asked: *'In my online teaching, I offer video conferencing sessions'*. The new survey instrument split this question into two: *'In my online teaching, I offer video conferencing sessions (e.g. weekly tutorials or collaborate sessions)'* and *'In my online teaching, I offer video conferencing sessions in addition to weekly tutorials or collaborates (e.g. 1-to-1 sessions)'*. Cronbach's Alpha for these measures was .856, indicating good reliability.

External support

Section three comprised of ten items related to external support in online teaching. The first four questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale where 1=*Strongly Disagree*, and 5=*Strongly agree* and asked participants to indicate the training they had received in the online environment. The following set of questions were specifically related to support in the role of an online teacher were rated on a 5-point Likert scale where 1=*never*, and 5=*always*. Cronbach's Alpha for these measures was .726, indicating good reliability. At the end of each sub-set of questions, participants were encouraged to explain their choices to Likert scale responses via the question: *'Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions'*.

Support and training

The final section of the survey included seven opportunities for participants to provide open-ended responses to questions regarding the type of support and training offered to them prior to online teaching, what types of additional support and training they felt might be useful, as well as their favourite and least favourite aspects of their role as an online teacher. One additional question was added to the original measure developed by Ahern and Biedermann (2022), which asked: *'What have you found most challenging in your role as an online teacher, and why?'* Given the current study was centred around supporting online teachers in this context, researchers felt asking this specific question could provide more depth to the data, as well as tangible recommendations.

Data analysis

One hundred and one individuals interacted with the survey. Participant responses were removed from the dataset if they completed less than 40% of the survey or if they did not meet the eligibility criteria (i.e. must have taught into an online psychology programme). Descriptive information was reported for quantitative responses, and open-ended responses were analysed using the reflexive thematic analysis approach, as adopted by Braun and Clarke (2022). Themes were identified inductively (i.e. on the basis of insight rather than any established theory). Specifically, analyses included an initial stage of familiarisation with responses and

generating an initial code guide. Initial codes were created by identifying units of text that referred to the same or similar semantic content. Following this, the entire data set was systematically coded by the lead author, and a tentative framework of themes was identified and discussed with other co-authors. Based on discussions about the aims and objectives of the study, themes were recategorised, recoding or removed.

Results

Perceptions of online teaching

Only one-third of the participants agreed that online teaching takes less time than face-to-face teaching. Despite this response, more than 50% agreed that online teaching provides an opportunity to improve teaching, develop new ideas, and motivates educators to learn new technology. In contrast, only 29.3% agreed that online teaching allows for opportunity for professional development. On the one hand, 45.4% indicated that online teaching provides job satisfaction, and 40% liked the intellectual challenge. Over half the respondents found online teaching isolating, challenging, and time-consuming. Lastly, over 45% indicated that online teaching allowed for autonomy and was suitable for their teaching style.

In the qualitative responses that asked to elaborate on this set of questions, there was a large focus on the conflict between enjoying the flexibility this mode offers yet presenting difficulty in regard to encouraging meaningful engagement with students. For example,

'Teaching online loses something in terms of the quality of relationships that can be forged when you're in the room and can pick up on nuanced communication cues. It adds something in terms of lecturer flexibility (which is the main reason I'm doing it)', [43 years of age; female; 3 years experience]

'I have more resources and information at my disposal when teaching online, and I can script and deliver easier online. Impromptu discussions happen easier in-person though'[42 years of age; male; 17 years experience], and

'Online [teaching] wouldn't be so bad except that we're not at a point yet of having good student engagement. If the students would show their cameras and engage appropriately it would be better. It is nice having the flexibility, though – being able to do it from home or even interstate'[39 years of age; female; 12 years experience].

Technology use and adaption

Regarding the use of technology for online teaching, 88% of the sample indicated they were comfortable using technology in teaching, and almost 70% either *Agreed* or *Strongly agreed* that they enjoyed using new technology for their work. The sample also indicated that 61.3% sought additional ways to use technologies in teaching, with 40% completing training or courses, and 66.7% learned new technology in their own time. Almost 30% of the sample indicated they were not provided with opportunities to learn to use new technology. When asked to expand on these responses, themes relating to a general lack of institutional support to allow the learning of new technologies for teaching, with a large focus on time-based constraints, were highlighted.

Participants reported that they sought new technologies and additional training at their own costs (either by way of time or money). For example,

'Unfortunately, we were not given time, training or resources to learn how to use new technologies and develop online classes. I was self-taught in my own time' [43 years of age; female; 18 years experience], and

'Zero support [from institution] in learning anything beyond basic, very easy to grasp university software and no time to learn any new skills'[31 years of age; male; 9 years experience].

Online teaching preparation

With regard to preparing for online teaching, responses indicated that 46.7% and 62.7% of respondents were provided and developed (respectively) their learning materials well in advance of their teaching. Responses were varied regarding time for preparation, with 44% indicating they have time to prepare for teaching and 33.3% indicating they did not. Responses also indicated that almost 90% of participants used their student feedback to adjust their teaching. In the qualitative responses however, there were many comments regarding the usefulness and practicality of such responses. For example,

'... I gave up on student surveys long ago. It suffered from Goldilocks's syndrome: too hot, too cold, just right. I do however listen to verbal feedback from students'[50 years of age; male; 20 years experience], and

'Most feedback from students are [...] things I cannot change or are out of my control'[32 years of age; female; 3 years experience].

Student engagement in the online context

Engaging students in the online environment is challenging. In this study, over 80% of participants indicated they used learner-to-learner collaboration and online discussion as a means of teaching, and 65.3% indicated they believed that high-quality experiences could occur *without* interaction with students face-to-face. Furthermore, 80% of respondents indicated they provided students a range of effective learning experiences, with 86.7% providing weekly collaborate or tutorial sessions, and 57% providing one-on-one sessions for students. Only 57.4% of educators indicated they get to know their students in their subjects.

Two prevalent themes arose when participants were asked to elaborate on this set of responses. The first was the conflict between wishing to offer additional learning sessions (e.g. one-on-one sessions) but this falling outside of contracted or paid hours. For example,

'We are not encouraged to offer video conferencing sessions or paid for them but I see value in these and would do so if this was budgeted' [43 years of age; female; 3 years experience], and

'I'd like to offer synchronous sessions but we don't get paid for it so we haven't included it in the curriculum yet. Student feedback strongly recommends it. I believe it would definitely enhance student experience and learning'[44 years of age; female; 10 years experience].

The second theme was again regarding student (lack of) engagement and large class sizes creating a challenge for student-educator connection. For example,

'I use online discussion as a means of teaching – I try. But students turn microphones off, turn video off, don't interact in the chat. You can't build rapport with someone who is as unengaged as that'[33 years of age; male; 11 years experience], and

'Often classes are too large to get to know students in the class though I try'[46 years of age; female; 4 years experience].

Overwhelmingly results of this study point to student engagement as the dominant theme when asked about the challenges of online teaching.

Online Teacher development

Mixed findings were evident regarding responses about online teacher development. In terms of receiving training for online instruction and receiving training for the learning management system (LMS), 38.6% *Disagreed* and 32% *Strongly disagreed* with this statement. Only 50.7% of participants indicated they understand what constitutes best practices in online teaching. Furthermore, only 53.33% were provided with opportunities to share knowledge about online teaching with other staff.

Overwhelmingly, when asked what additional training would be useful for their role as an online teacher, the theme of student engagement-based initiatives was most prevalent.

Being supported as an online Teacher

In terms of being supported by faculty in their role as an online instructor, 38.7% of respondents indicated this occurred *Sometimes*, and 29.3% indicated *Most of the time*. A similar dispersion of results was also found for whether respondents felt they were part of a team when working as an online educator, with 29.3% of respondents indicated this occurred *Sometimes*, and 24% *Most of the time*. Furthermore, 34.7% of respondents indicated they received adequate technological support *Most of the time*, with 48% reporting this occurred *Rarely* or *Sometimes*. In terms of feeling isolated in an online role, between 20% and 30% of respondents reported feeling this way *Rarely*, *Sometimes*, and *Most of the time*, with 38.7% reporting they felt they needed more support.

When respondents were asked what support is provided, a prominent theme beyond 'IT support' was that of collegial assistance, due to a lack of support from faculty heads or the broader institution. For example, *'It's mostly support via the team, very little support is given from the school (psych) or the course coordinator'* [32 years of age; female; 3 years experience] and *'Not much support is provided by the institution per se, rather, support is provided by individuals who want to provide that extra support that may be needed'* [29 years of age; male; 7 years experience]. Overwhelmingly, almost 80% of respondents responded 'yes' when asked, *'Could you be better supported as an online teacher?'*

Whilst an array of issues were presented, when asked what support respondents wish they had more of, a dominant theme was the acknowledgement of the challenges (including lack of time, increased workload, student engagement difficulties) and the uniqueness of online teaching. For example, *'Acknowledgement of the time it takes to prepare and upload high quality online learning resources and to update these ...'* [37 years of age; female; 14 years experience].

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to understand the learning and professional experiences of Australian psychology educators teaching into online programmes, and to suggest support strategies to address the needs of this population in a post-COVID-19 online teaching era. This work builds on the efforts of Ahern and Biedermann (2022), examining the experiences and needs of Australian online post-graduate nursing academics by examining whether the needs of Nursing academic mirrors those of Psychology in Australia.

The results of the study highlight notable dilemmas faced by online educators across various aspects. Whilst many acknowledge online teaching is more time demanding, consistent with previous literature (e.g. Ahern and Biedermann 2022), they also view it as an opportunity for personal development. Similarly, several respondents appreciate the stimulating nature of online teaching, enjoying the autonomy, and flexibility. Conversely, others find it burdensome, indicating this mode of teaching dampens the development of meaningful staff–student relationships, resulting in reduced student engagement (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago 2017). In essence, these findings underscore the intricate balance between the perceived advantages and challenges of online teaching, arguably present in all teaching modalities across all disciplines.

In line with previous literature, student engagement was a dominant and recurring theme in the current study (e.g. Bolliger and Martin 2018; Niess and Gillow-Wiles 2013). In the world of online teaching, a paradox emerges where respondents believe they can create meaningful educational experiences devoid of in-person interactions, however whilst also encountering the recurring struggle to engage students. This is also evidenced in the work by Ahern and Biedermann (2022), where building community and fostering relationships seem to be a significant concern across both nursing and psychology online disciplines. Perhaps this concern is particularly pronounced given

both psychology and nursing are deeply human-centred professions, and future work could examine this argument in other fields.

The link between student engagement and learning in online learning arguably centres on educators leveraging off available technology – and not only using it, but using it proficiently to captivate students (Limperos et al. 2015). Those unable to harness online teaching pedagogy and technology run the risk of scarce engagement levels, ultimately impacting students' learning experiences and outcomes (Bond and Bedenlier 2019). Whilst education has found ways to use technology in innovative ways to increase course offerings (Roddy et al. 2017), perhaps the transition was too rapid, due to COVID-19, creating more barriers (Ahmad et al. 2020). The majority of respondents in the current study reported no issues with using technology, however participants did note the lack of institutional support for growth in this area.

As education progresses, the rise of online teaching stands as an increasingly essential mode. However, a glaring deficiency emerges in the form of inadequate support from tertiary institutions, hindering educators' potential for growth and development in this context. Insufficient time allocation undermines educators' capacity to perform jobs effectively, potentially stemming from a lack of understanding among management about the intricacies of an online educator's role. Despite these challenges, the flexibility inherent in this profession persists as a major drawcard, which appears to be a long-standing advantage of this teaching modality (Roddy et al. 2017), likely contributing to the sustained recruitment of online educators, and the growth and success of online programmes. However, the hidden cost is the decreased job satisfaction of employees, induced by minimal student engagement and the inherently external nature of these positions.

The issue of isolation has been frequently discussed in historical literature examining how students perceive online learning (e.g. Dreamson 2019; Erichsen and Bolliger 2011), with this concern also observed in the research by Ahern and Biedermann (2022), however on staff cohorts. Both in the current study, and the work by Ahern and Biedermann (2022), only half of each participant sample stated they have opportunities to share their knowledge and collaborate with other online educators. This emphasises the concern with working in online environments as it appears to restrict personal development and hinder the broader progress of their respective disciplines. Furthermore, in the current study, over half of the respondents indicated they did not know what constituted 'best practice', highlighting yet again a lack of collaboration among colleagues.

Recommendations

A central theme that threads across challenges experienced by educators is the larger institutional support. One of the ways institutions can provide support is by fostering a sense of community within departments. Encouraging regular knowledge-sharing sessions or forums can provide valuable opportunities for academics to collaborate, share insights, and exchange ideas, both within and between modalities (face-to-face and online) (Vangrieken et al. 2017). In addition, given that online educators face similar challenges across disciplines, interdepartmental groups consisting of online educators can be useful for information sharing and problem solving (Owen 2014). Furthermore, creating interdisciplinary projects or initiatives could also encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration, helping academics feel more interconnected despite working remotely, thereby reducing feelings of isolation. This though, needs to be initiated by those in managerial and leadership roles to establish a supportive framework and foster a culture of interdisciplinary engagement.

Well over half of the respondents in the current sample indicated they required some form of additional support in their roles as online psychology academics. Institutions can better support academics in this context by introducing specialised training workshops tailored to the unique challenges of online academia – such as technological barriers to communicating with students and difficulty in keeping students engaged (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago 2017). These

initiatives could include improving digital teaching techniques and strategies for nurturing online student participation (Niess and Gillow-Wiles 2013).

Importantly, institutions must acknowledge the distinctive nature of online teaching, give it the recognition it deserves. There are two ways that institutions can achieve this. Firstly, tailoring approaches specific to online teaching rather than applying traditional educational paradigms marked as successful in face-to-face modalities (El-Soussi 2022; Rapanta et al. 2021). Secondly, institutions need to allocate sufficient time to instructors for training to teach online and preparing of online materials (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago 2017). This allows instructors to feel confident in online delivery which can have an impact on student outcomes (Zee, Koomen, and de Jong 2018). Given the importance of student success is largely dependent on the instructor, this not only helps with keeping the courses running but staff as well (Tunks 2012).

Limitations and strengths

While the current study provided valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of the Australian online psychology educator cohort, it also presents inherent limitations, with the most notable being the self-report survey. This data collection methodology is subject to response biases, potentially influencing the accuracy and reliability of the gathered data, possibly not capturing the full range of experiences. Our sample size of 75 participants is also relatively small for generalising results to the broader population of Australian online psychology educators. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of our study provides a snapshot of educators' experiences at a single point in time. A longitudinal study could offer insights into how perceptions and challenges evolve over time, especially given the rapid changes in online education. However, a notable strength of this research is that, it is the first study explicitly examining the Australian online psychology educator cohort. Thus, this study fills a critical gap in the literature, laying the groundwork for future investigations and providing a foundational understanding of this specific educational domain.

Conclusions

The findings taken from this study are not unique to online psychology academics; they echo a larger reality within online education. When comparing to the pre-COVID-19 work of Ahern and Biedermann (2022), it is clear that the challenges are paralleled with those of online nursing educators. In summary, student engagement persists as a paramount concern for educators striving to cultivate a truly enriching online learning experience – one that is acknowledged as challenging, however with its own benefits of flexibility and autonomy. The evolving nature of technology and its use in online education emphasises the ongoing demand for collaborative efforts and supportive structures within academia to navigate the ever-evolving terrain of online education. These challenges highlight the crucial need for larger institutional support to assist in navigating this digital landscape and to acknowledge online educators, their jobs demands and contribution to modern education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Q1 What is your age (in years)?

Q2 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Do not wish to disclose

Q3 At any point in the past five years, have you taught into an undergraduate psychology, postgraduate psychology or psychological science programme that is taught online (including full-time, part-time or casual/sessional teaching)?

- Yes
- No

Q4 What type of employment did you have when you taught into an online postgraduate psychology or psychological science programme (*note you can choose more than one option*)?

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Casual/Sessional

Q5 What type of position did you have when you taught into an online postgraduate psychology or psychological science programme (*note you can choose more than one option*)?

- Lecturer
- Course Coordinator
- Tutor
- Other: _____

Q6 Did you teach into an online postgraduate psychology or psychological science programme pre-COVID (*i.e. before March 2020*)?

- Yes
- No

Q7 Approximately, how many years have you been teaching in higher education (in any capacity)? Enter a number.

Q8 Choose the answer which best matches how you would rate your experience teaching:

Novice (1)	Advanced beginner (2)	Competent (3)	Proficient (4)	Expert (5)
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- Face-to-face mode
- Online teaching mode
- Blended mode (face-to-face and online)

The following questions ask information about your experiences of ONLINE TEACHING only

Q9 Thinking about your ONLINE TEACHING only, select the option which best matches your response to the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
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- I am comfortable using technology in teaching
- I enjoy learning new technology for my work
- I seek additional ways to use technology in teaching
- I am provided with opportunities to learn to use new technologies
- I have completed training courses to learn the technologies I use in teaching
- I learn new technologies in my own time

Q10 Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions.

Q11 Thinking about your ONLINE TEACHING only, select the option which best matches your response to the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
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- I am provided with learning materials well in advance of my teaching
- I develop my learning materials well in advance of my teaching
- I have time to prepare for teaching
- I have time to dedicate to marking student work and providing adequate feedback to enhance student learning
- I am confident and competent teaching the content that I am required to teach
- I use student feedback about my teaching to make necessary modifications

Q12 Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions.

Q13 Thinking about your ONLINE TEACHING only, select the option which best matches your response to the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
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- In my work, I must design and develop all online learning materials myself
- In my work, the learning environment is developed and designed by someone other than myself
- In online courses where I teach, the online learning environment is produced effectively to enhance learner engagement with course content
- I am included in the content writing process
- I am included in the assessment writing process
- I am included in evaluation and revision of learning materials

Q14 Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions.

Q15 Thinking about your ONLINE TEACHING only, select the option which best matches your response to the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
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- I believe online teaching takes less time than teaching face to face
- I believe online teaching offers opportunities to improve my teaching
- I believe online teaching offers opportunities to develop new ideas
- I believe online teaching offers more professional development opportunities
- I believe online teaching offers me job satisfaction
- I believe online teaching motivates me to learn new technology
- I like the intellectual challenge teaching online presents
- Teaching online is isolating
- Teaching in online courses is challenging
- Teaching in online courses is time consuming
- Teaching online allows for autonomy
- Teaching online is suitable to my teaching style

Q16 Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions.

Q17 Thinking about your ONLINE TEACHING only, select the option which best matches your response to the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
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- I support learner-to-learner interaction and collaborative activity as a means of teaching
- I use online discussion as a means of teaching
- I believe that high-quality experiences can occur without interacting with students face to face
- I provide students a range of effective learning experiences when teaching online
- In my online teaching, I offer video conferencing sessions (e.g. weekly tutorials or collaborate sessions)
- In my online teaching, I offer video conferencing sessions in addition to weekly tutorials or collaborates (e.g. 1-to-1 sessions)
- I get to know the students in my course/subject

Q18 Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions.

Q19 Thinking about your ONLINE TEACHING only, select the option which best matches your response to the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
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- I have received training in online instruction
- I have received training to learn to use the learning management system (LMS)
- I understand what constitutes best practices in online teaching
- I am provided with opportunities to share my knowledge and ideas about online teaching with other staff

Q20 Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions.

Q21 Thinking about your ONLINE TEACHING only, select the option which best matches your response to the following statements:

Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
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- I am supported by faculty in my role as an online teacher
- I feel I am part of a team when working in my role as an online teacher
- I receive adequate technological support in my role as an online teacher
- I feel isolated in my role as an online teacher
- I feel I need more support in my role as an online teacher
- I get opportunities to work with other staff in my role as an online teacher

Q22 Use this space to explain your response/s to any of the above questions.

The following questions seek to better understand your experiences and your needs as an online teacher. The questions allow an open-ended response. Please provide as much detail as possible. Any identifying information will be removed from the analysis and final report.

Q23 What support is provided to you in your role as an online teacher?

Q24 What have you found most challenging in your role as an online teacher, and why?

Q25 Could you be better supported as an online teacher?

- No
- Yes

Q26 Explain what support you wish you had more of.

Q27 Did you receive any training specific to online teaching before beginning to teach online?

- Yes
- No

Q28 Please provide details of any training specific to online teaching you received.

Q29 Is there additional training you feel you need to assist you in your role as an online teacher?

- Yes
- No

Q30 Explain what additional training would be useful to your role as an online teacher.

Q31 My **least favourite** aspect/s of my role as an online teacher are:

Q32 My **favourite** aspect/s of my role as an online teacher are: