

# Online teaching during COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji: challenges, facilitators and improvement strategies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to explore online teaching experiences of educators in Fiji National University (FNU). Although they quickly adapted to online teaching, their experiences are yet to be explored and documented, hence the relevance of this study.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study used phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences of participants' regarding online teaching. A total of 58 in-depth interviews were conducted among educators, at various levels and analysed thematically using an inductive approach.

**Findings** – The findings show online teaching challenges including difficulties maintaining students' engagement, teaching practically oriented courses, assessing students and embracing change, limited knowledge impact and output, anxiety and stress, inadequate teaching environment, increased workload and unstable Internet. The facilitators and enablers were flexibility, free Internet, creating conducive environment, Moodle training, skills acquisition and support from faculty members' and information technology team. Recommendations for improvement ranged from modifying course outline, summarising previous lessons, reducing course load, adequate assessment tools, incentives, guidelines enforcement to regular training.

**Originality/value** – This is an original work carried out by the researchers in a specific context. The findings suggest the need to address various challenges for effective online teaching. School managers' and relevant key stakeholders need to understand educators' teaching experiences as well as their recommended improvement strategies, to enhance online teaching.

**Keywords** COVID-19 pandemic, Online teaching, Phenomenology, Challenges, Facilitators, Improvement strategies, Qualitative research

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The world is undergoing a life-threatening situation resulting from COVID-19 pandemic, as the biggest mishap ever faced by humanity. Due to the contagious nature of the disease, most of the countries including Fiji Island, discontinued all in-person engagements, including, in-person education (Bacon and Peacock, 2021; Beason-Abmayr *et al.*, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has

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brought changes in the lives of humans to address the impact of pandemic prevention interventions and our education system is no exception. After experiencing the first phase of the national lockdown in Fiji between March and June 2020, the second wave of the pandemic led to another lockdown which lasted for nine months (March to November 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries worldwide embraced online teaching and learning techniques in their schools. There is an increased use of Information Communication Technology (ICT), in delivering educational content and learning support in many higher education institutions (Azhari and Fajri, 2022; Pham and Ho, 2020; Abdulkareem and Eidan, 2020). Some institutions opted for online teaching platforms, while others could not start their online teaching, specifically, those in the remote settings. Also, students in the urban areas continued their learning activities but it was difficult for those staying in small villages due to unstable Internet facilities and their inability to purchase online learning devices (Salik and Chowdhury, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2021). This mostly occurs in developing countries, such as those in the Pacific region (Reddy *et al.*, 2019, 2020b; Sharma *et al.*, 2020), where some students may not be able to afford online teaching devices such as computers or be able to purchase Internet plans with enough bandwidth and data for video streaming or other applications (Chillemi *et al.*, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2021). As such, some of the countries in the Pacific region have put in place initiatives to supply students with laptops and tablets to support their studies (Reddy *et al.*, 2016, 2017, 2020a), with no such initiatives for educators.

In responding to the pandemic, both educators and students had no option other than to quickly adapt to changing their learning and teaching methods to online, regardless of whether they were familiar with online education (Beason-Abmayr *et al.*, 2021; Müller *et al.*, 2021). Thus, online teaching and learning remain the only way to address the global pedagogical catastrophe resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Müller *et al.*, 2021; Basilaia *et al.*, 2020). This has led to restructuring and redesigning of educational systems to meet the demands of the unprecedented situation. The change of students' assessments to online was also accompanied by uncertainties for everyone, with a large trial and error component to ascertain the best possible means (Burgess and Sievertsen, 2020). This is because face-to-face and online teaching is basically different and both educators and students can see the differences. Apart from providing relevant instructional materials in the online network, online teaching calls for additional logistic support such as computers and access to Internet facilities (Khanom *et al.*, 2021; Geladze, 2015).

Considering the future of educational settings, online teaching has offered a greater prospect and opportunity to teach in a creative and innovative way. This mode of teaching encourages students to be active, while delivering common ideas about the subject matter (Serin, 2020). Educators can engage in effective collaboration among themselves, to enhance online teaching approaches (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). However, the abrupt shift from in-person to online teaching has distracted the attention of educators and university authorities from thoroughly recognising the key challenges in teaching online courses. Previous studies have identified challenges such as the use of technology, communication and students' behavioural characteristics (Rajab *et al.*, 2020; Farooq *et al.*, 2020), as well as depriving educators and students of enjoying the benefits of social interactions derived from typical school settings (Gunawan *et al.*, 2020). Other scholars have identified barriers to the online learning environment, from the teaching and learning perspectives. These included providing a broadband network, supporting institutional systems and the inclination of educators to capture the online study resources (Meskhi *et al.*, 2019; Sadeghi, 2019). This study contributes to knowledge by mainly exploring and understanding university educators' experiences regarding online teaching in the Fiji context.

Fiji Island is already battling with challenges related to climate change and natural disasters including cyclones. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded this, by revealing the vulnerability and the limited capacity of the healthcare system (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2020; Singh

*et al.*, 2022) and limited Internet accessibility (Mukuna and Aloka, 2020; Tadesse and Muluye, 2020). The cultural practices in relation to the extended family system and religious practices, increase the risk of infections and interactions among people (Khatana and Groeneveld, 2020). Together, these could have adverse effects on online teaching in the country, hence the relevance of this study.

The aim of this study is to explore educators' experiences of online teaching in relation to facilitators, challenges and improvement techniques. It is expected that our findings will be useful not only for education providers in Fiji, but also policy makers and other relevant university authorities to provide adequate support to improve online teaching, especially, during public health emergency situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) What facilitates online teaching among educators during the pandemic?
- (2) What are the online teaching challenges faced by educators during the pandemic?
- (3) How can online teaching be improved among educators?

### Literature review

The integration of information and communication technology into the education system has greatly impacted the education process, particularly, in higher education, by utilising information and communication technologies. Thus, web platforms and technologies are used to produce a two-way platform for communication and discussion between educators and students, thereby improving social learning between the students, while educators provide support to students through feedback (Layali and Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Aljawarneh, 2020; Al-Zahrani, 2015). Various learning approaches such as internet-based or web-based have led to different means of learning including mobile (m)-learning, e-learning, flipped classroom and tablet learning (Ansong-Gyimah, 2020; Reddy *et al.*, 2016).

In recent years, online teaching and learning have become popular in academia (Bhuvanewari and Dharanipriya, 2020; El Mhouti *et al.*, 2018) and change continuously to meet the needs and demands of students, at different levels (Dounas *et al.*, 2019; Bhuvanewari and Dharanipriya, 2020). The online education system has therefore become essential, with the possibility of managing, planning, delivering and tracking teaching and learning processes, by providers (Almaiah *et al.*, 2020). It comprises a wide set of applications and procedures ranging from computer-assisted teaching and learning, web-based training, virtual classrooms and digital collaboration (Kashive *et al.*, 2020). Advantages of the online teaching model include flexibility, encourages students to be active and it's apposite for learners with pictorial way of thinking (Kashive *et al.*, 2020; Layali and Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Reddy *et al.*, 2016). Despite its benefit, factors such as competency in technology use, isolation, technology adequacy and complexity (Rasheed *et al.*, 2020; Lemay *et al.*, 2021; Drane *et al.*, 2021), could serve as barriers to the successful implementation and delivery of online education.

Like many other developing countries, Fiji Island is presently undergoing technological transformation to meet the increasing digital demands of the population (Reddy *et al.*, 2020b; Sharma *et al.*, 2019). Though higher education institutions in Fiji are gradually embracing technology assisted teaching and learning, to meet students' demands, the phenomena is still evolving. Nevertheless, the education system has considered the COVID-19 pandemic as an emergency that has called for prompt action from face-to-face teaching to using online platforms and educators are compelled to embrace a system they are not fully prepared for (Van Der Spoel *et al.*, 2020). Universities who operated predominantly in the traditional mode of teaching (face-to-face delivery mode), faced many challenges, as they struggled to transfer their course content online (Petillion and Mcneil, 2020; Meleo-Erwin *et al.*, 2021). Universities in Fiji have been hit hard due to the

difficulties in accessing stable Internet facilities (Mukuna and Aloka, 2020; Tadesse and Muluye, 2020), which could affect the ability of educators to adequately cover their course materials.

Apart from issues related to Internet connectivity, the ability of educators to use appropriate and applicable pedagogy for online teaching, is dependent on their expertise and how much they are exposed to information and communication technologies (Tortorella *et al.*, 2021; Azhari and Fajri, 2022). Various platforms which enable educators to produce educational courses and create programmes for training and skills development, include Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Canvas and Moodle (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Educators in Fiji, including FNU, mainly deliver their lectures through Zoom and share their notes and multi-media resources related to their courses through the Moodle platform. Students submit their assignments through Moodle and educators can track their progress. As the Pacific's primary learning management system, Moodle was chosen by Pacific's University Technology Committee in place of Blackboard. It offers staff and students web spaces for various courses taught, online quizzes, discussion forums and other instructional tools (Costello, 2013).

Though online education remained the only available means for universities to maintain their students base for learning continuity, during COVID-19 pandemic (Cutri *et al.*, 2020, Lei and So, 2021, Mittal *et al.*, 2021, Saha *et al.*, 2022, Ní Fhloinn and Fitzmaurice, 2021, Azhari and Fajri, 2022), there are no published data available on university educators' online teaching experiences from the Fiji Island, hence the need to explore online teaching experiences among educators of FNU. As the national public university of Fiji, FNU supports the development of the nation, by offering both technical and vocational education and training and higher levels up to doctoral degrees. With a population of about 20,000, the university has 10 major campuses and study centres spread across various regions (Institutional Research and Planning Office, 2020). The campuses differ in size in terms of students' and staff numbers as well as the services and facilities available to them (Institutional Research and Planning Office, 2020). FNU provides flexible and distance learning programmes but most of the students were enrolled in face-to-face programmes until during the COVID-19 pandemic, where all students and educators were forced to go online.

## Theoretical framework

### *Change management theory*

From a theoretical point of view, the teaching experiences can be viewed through change management theory, dividing the process of change into three stages as unfreezing, changing and refreezing processes (Lewin, 1958). Unfreezing of the traditional mode of teaching and learning happened during unanticipated situations resulting from COVID-19. This led to abruptly moving into online teaching due to unexpected uncertainties in continuing with the traditional teaching mode. Currently, engaging in face-to-face classes is somewhat impossible during this COVID-19 crisis, in which keeping social distancing has become the order of the day. Therefore, undeniably, the online learning approach was deemed necessary, bringing both organisation and individual in an unfreezing stage. The *unfreezing* step offered an opportunity for stakeholders and systems to be inspired (Siegal *et al.*, 1996).

Also, teaching online provides a sense of safety to the learning community during COVID-19 crisis. The *changing* process involves institutions' ability to innovate their own online modes or embrace a new one being used in various institutions elsewhere. There is continuous exploration for a method that can be well implemented. In this instance, change cannot be described as a one-time occurrence; instead, it's a process that is dynamic, as an interruption in continuity. For any change to produce the desired results, studies have identified the need to take into consideration issues related to time frames and a new mindset (Bridges, 1991). This includes the transition from face-to-face to online teaching mode, either at the personal or organisational level.

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The need to incorporate resilience into the educational system has been established (Tam and El-Azar, 2020). Tam and El-Azar have shown different trends that would be observed in educational transformations in future, such as, increasing innovations in education and educational collaboration between public and private sectors. The online experiences have created a paradigm shift related to online teaching, which is likely to gain prominence even when the COVID-19 crisis is over, moving to a *refreezing phase*. The refreezing stage is necessary to incorporate the use of technology in our teaching and learning processes in ways that allow lecturers to teach students using methods with which they are comfortable and that are in line with current technological demands. Though changing to new ideas in the educational system is our aim, this cannot be effective unless the online teaching experiences of educators in specific contexts are explored and understood, which is the purpose of conducting this study.

## Methods

### *Study setting*

The research was carried out among FNU educators. The university, which is in Suva, the capital, serves the entire Pacific region and beyond, with a total student population estimated as 20,000 (Institutional Research and Planning Office, 2020). The university has various colleges including, College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF), College of Business, Hospitality and Tourism Studies (CBHTS), College of Engineering, Science and Technology (CEST), College of Humanities and Education (CHE) and College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS).

### *Study design*

This study used phenomenological research design to examine the experiences of educators in adapting to online teaching, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study design enabled the researchers to obtain in-depth information on the phenomenon under study, obtained from those who were directly involved in online teaching and had a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thus, the experiences of the educators formed the authentic source of knowledge for this study (Padilla-Díaz, 2015).

The concept of reflexivity was embraced during this research, to improve rigour and quality in the methods used. Through this, the researchers appreciated their roles in creating knowledge (Dodgson, 2019; Teh and Evonne, 2018) and realised that meanings are conveyed within a particular occurrence, context and settings. Therefore, reflexivity was maintained by taking reflexive notes during the in-depth interviews, which provided in-depth information to enrich the data collected (Mason-Bish, 2019).

### *Study participants*

The study participants consisted of 58 educators comprising professors, associate professors, assistant professors, lecturers and assistant lecturers. Participants were contacted directly, through email or phone calls to ask for their participation. To be included in the study, participants should be FNU educators, able to communicate in English, have no disability such as mental health disorder or ill health and willing to participate in the study. The researchers took into consideration factors such as age, gender, tribe, religion and marital status in selecting participants for the study, to improve diversity in the data obtained.

### *Data collection*

Data were collected between February and August 2021 and involved conducting in-depth interviews with study participants, using a semi-structured interview guide. Each interview

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lasted for about 40 min and was audio recorded, for data assurance purpose. The guide was piloted to make sure that the structure and length was suitable (Rosenthal, 2016). Semi-structured interviews have been proven to be flexible and could be revised during the process to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). The data collection began with a face-to-face interview at a venue participants considered comfortable, but this was changed to online interviews (Zoom), when the COVID-19 community transmission began in Fiji Island. The online data collection was initially integrated into the study design to cater for emergency situations.

The interviews were conducted at times convenient for both the interviewer and the interviewee. The researchers made sure the collection of data produced a non-threatening and comfortable environment, making it easier for respondents to discuss sensitive issues (Alase, 2017). Given that saturation is an essential component of rigor, the data collection was halted, when there was no new information or themes observed in the data (Morse, 1995).

#### *Data handling and analysis*

The team members, after transcribing the audio recordings and field notes, check the transcripts with the audio-records to ascertain the quality and accuracy. The data were analysed independently by two authors, using Clarke and Braun (2013), six-phase thematic guide. The first phase involved familiarising ourselves with the data through multiple readings of the transcripts. In the second phase, similar ideas were grouped together leading to the generation of initial codes. The initial codes and corresponding excerpts were reviewed to confirm the eligibility of the codes identified. While phase three identified themes based on the initial codes, the fourth phase reviewed and refined the themes. Defining and naming of the themes occurred in phase five and the final phase created the thematic categories, themes and sub-themes of the study. Data analysis involved an inductive approach, where categories, sub-themes and themes were identified from the data (Azungah, 2018).

#### *Rigor and trustworthiness*

This study used four criteria to establish methodological rigour and trustworthiness. These included credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability (Jones *et al.*, 2012; Morse, 2015; Forero *et al.*, 2018). The flexibility of the semi-structured interview process improved the credibility of the study. Thus, beginning with a broad set of questions and option to use probes enabled the researchers to obtain in-depth information. The audio recordings ensured that the exact words from participants were captured during the in-depth interviews (Rosenthal, 2016). Additional ways used to enhance the credibility of the study were establishing investigators' authority in the research area, by making sure that the researchers were acquainted with the research context and phenomenon and the interviewers were experienced in collecting qualitative data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The data collection processes, analysis and interpretation were used to assess the confirmability criterion. The researchers maintained regular communication among themselves, to ensure that the interviewers abided by the study protocol for recruiting participants. Those included in the analysis of the data, systematically reviewed the transcripts against the audio files to check for accuracy, consistency and clarification (Carcary, 2020). The team agreed on the coding process and identified key concepts, categories, sub-themes and themes.

The monitoring of the processes involved in the data analysis improved consistency as well as correct results interpretation (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). The dependability criterion involved detailed description of the study processes including the data collection method, analysis process and the interpretation of results. For the transferability criterion, as highlighted in the method sections, the purposive sampling technique used, ensured diversity

in choosing the study participants, making it possible to compare analysis across various levels (Baillie, 2015; Forero *et al.*, 2018). Rigor and trustworthiness were maintained throughout the study, including ethical issues.

#### *Ethical consideration*

This study received ethical clearance from the College Human Health Research Ethics Committee (CHHREC), Fiji Institute of Pacific Health Research (FIPHR), with approval number 298.20. All the protocols used in this study, adhered to the ethical principles of the university. Detailed and essential information related to the study was provided to the study participants and their concerns and questions were systematically addressed. Participants were made to sign informed consent forms before starting all in-depth interviews. They were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and their right not to respond to a particular question. Participants' real names were replaced with codes in the audio recordings and all identifiers separated from the data to prevent the possibility of being identified.

#### *Findings*

The findings indicate educators' experiences regarding online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the participants were assistant professors (33%), males (55%), married (76%) and within the Indo-Fijian ethnic group (45%). The age ranged from 36 to 58, with the majority (52%), belonging to the Christian religion (Table 1).

The three broad themes and sub-themes that emerged during the analysis of the data are presented below with illustrative statements from research participants.

Variables	<i>n</i> = 58
<i>Median Age in years (range)</i>	47 (36–58)
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	32 (55%)
Female	26 (45%)
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
I-Taukei	20 (34%)
Indo-Fijian	26 (45%)
Others	12 (21%)
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single	12 (21%)
Married	44 (76%)
Divorced	2 (3%)
<i>Religion</i>	
Christian	30 (52%)
Hinduism	25 (43%)
Moslem	3 (5%)
<i>Academic level</i>	
Professor	2 (3%)
Associate Professor	4 (7%)
Assistant Professor	19 (33%)
Lecturers	17 (29%)
Assistant Lecturers	16 (28%)

**Table 1.**  
Demographic  
characteristics of  
educators' interviewed

*Online teaching challenges*

*Difficult maintaining students' engagement.* Most of the educators prior to the COVID-19 pandemic had no formal training in online teaching and were not aware of the intricacies of interacting with students, virtually. They therefore found it challenging to engage students during their online classes,

My biggest challenge is to make sure that students pay attention to me during classes. I will say with the online classes, not all the students are able to concentrate and listen to what you are teaching, from the beginning to the end. Sometimes, when you receive their assignments, you are able to tell they didn't pay attention because you can see they didn't follow instructions. (E1)

Apart from the difficulties involved in engaging students, many of the educators believed, some students deliberately shut their videos during online classes to engage in other activities, which affected their concentration level,

I definitely prefer face to face to online teaching because even when you accompany online teaching with zoom lectures, generally, the perception is the students open your lectures and they shut down the video and they start roaming about here and there. They never pay attention to what you are teaching them. (E22)

Another educator in support of E22, further attributed the low concentration level of students during online classes to boredom, resulting from the prolonged lockdown due to COVID-19,

In fact, the COVID-19 has created a situation which is difficult for everybody to function well so I will not blame the students. Some of them are not able to concentrate during online lectures and I think it's because they are bored sitting at home for a long time due to lockdown but this is the new norm so we have to accept it and live with it. (E4)

*Difficult teaching practical oriented courses.* Though respondents acknowledged the importance of the practical aspects of teaching, they were unable to fulfil this as a teaching requirement, since all classes were conducted online. The field practicals were replaced with the use of simulations and videos, which they found time consuming and less beneficial,

My students were supposed to go to the field but couldn't go because of the COVID-19 issues we are facing now. So in place of that, we used simulations including videos and presentations to meet that aspect of the course but it takes time and lots of our energy and with this, the students will miss the benefits of conducting actual fieldwork. (E51)

*Increased workload.* Participants explained that preparing for online lectures took longer compared to face-to-face classes. They have to send several reminders to students before they submitted their assignments and took their quizzes, leading to virtual fatigue,

It takes a lot, I mean a lot of time and energy to be chasing students to submit assignments, most of the time. It's difficult because we do not see them face-to-face, so now, we have to send several messages to remind these students. Sometimes, you get tired doing this, but we cannot do much because of COVID-19. (E3)

*Limited output.* Respondents explained how their work satisfaction depended on students' ability to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the courses taught, but this was not realised. The output from students has affected educators' interest in online teaching,

I will say, I do not want to run online courses especially for undergraduate students because the hours spent in making things easy for them to understand is much more as compared to face to face and the output you get from those students is much less as compared to what you get from face to face in terms of their understanding. In terms of their reproducibility of what you have taught them in the class, it is much less in online mode. As a lecturer what gives me satisfaction is when my students are able to show that they have understood whatever I taught them. (E6)



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*Anxiety and stress.* Online teaching has caused educators to experience anxiety and stress. This was attributed to the unwillingness of students to take their quizzes, late submission of assignments and frequent asking of questions, which were sometimes regarded unnecessary,

You know, it requires effort teaching students online and you have to also be more cautious about responding to all questions. Sometimes students ask questions like, are we having a test tomorrow, even when the test is open and you have given several reminders on the platforms and that makes lecturers anxious and it can be stressful because you know the students are not prepared for the test. (E7)

*Limited knowledge impact.* Participants explained that, until students are motivated to take their studies seriously, online teaching would make limited impact, in relation to knowledge and skills acquisition, due to the poor attitudes of students towards learning,

With online teaching, what I have experienced is students keep on piling the notes till they are about to take a test or quiz because they are only interested in their grades and this will continue to have a negative impact on students unless they are motivated to learn on their own to build their career. (E10)

*Assessment difficulties.* Most of the respondents questioned the online assessment transparency, since most of the students copied examination answers and submitted assignments with high plagiarism scores,

Some of the students are now not serious because of the online teaching and because of the modified assessments where we test them online. I am saying this because most of them during quizzes or exams copy answers from online and their assignments have a high plagiarism percentage. When that happens, they will pass the test or pass the course without getting real knowledge for life, which is not good. (E1)

*Inadequate teaching environment.* The difficulty working from home and maintaining a work-life balance was mentioned, especially among the female educators. In a conservative society like Fiji, females have additional tasks to manage their household and take care of other family members including their children, who stayed with them, during COVID-19 lockdown,

I think my only challenge with online teaching is taking care of the children and other family members and working at the same time, which is very stressful. One time my husband was sleeping, I ran away from my kids and found him in the room and he was snoring, so I kicked his leg to stop and he said, this is not the classroom. He was snoring so I had to find another empty room for my class, which was difficult. So having a proper place to do the zoom classes is also a big issue. (E47)

*Difficult embracing change.* Having been used to face-to-face teaching, many of the educators were still expecting to go back to their usual ways of teaching, as soon as possible. This, coupled with other social benefits of interacting with students, have made it difficult for them to accept the transition to online teaching,

I think the challenge now is how to fully accept that COVID-19 has changed things, so we have to learn to accept the online teaching instead of waking up every day and looking forward to face-to-face classes soon. Change is not easy because we all enjoy face-to-face interactions with students. (E32)

*Unstable Internet.* Internet connectivity was one of the major challenges encountered by educators in the study area, which sometimes affected the delivery of their online classes. The movement restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the situation of accessing alternative Internet sources from other places,

The internet is sometimes a big problem at home. It's like on and off and gets disconnected during online classes and you also need it to download online materials to support your teaching as a

lecturer and you can't go to other places because of the lockdown. Even the campus initially had some level of restrictions. (E17)

Participants have identified online teaching challenges such as unstable Internet, inadequate teaching environment and increased workload. The additional time used in teaching, produced limited impact in knowledge and outputs from students', causing stress and anxiety on the part of educators. It was difficult maintaining students' engagement, teaching courses with practical components and conducting assessment in a fair manner.

### *Facilitators and enablers*

*Flexibility.* The flexibility of online teaching seemed appealing among many of the educators. Apart from the possibility of reshuffling their classes, it provided convenience and freedom for students to decide and allocate suitable time for their studies,

The only advantage is that online teaching is flexible for everyone. The regional students in the nearby countries, in our postgraduate courses and even those here, in Fiji, can read those notes in Moodle and respond to the forum discussions at any time and this is an advantage to them. I can also upload my lecture notes at any time and I can easily reschedule my lectures when there is the need. (E33)

*Free Internet.* The university authorities in facilitating online teaching, paid for the Internet data used by the educators, on a monthly basis. This served as a form of motivation for educators' and enabled them to fulfil their teaching obligations, though they complained of the slow and unreliable nature of the Internet services,

I will say FNU leaders are doing very well by paying for the data we use as lecturers. I think this is helping our online teaching and I see that it is also motivating us but sometimes the internet is not all that good, but we are managing. It can be very slow and goes off during classes. (E10)

Despite the COVID-19 movement restrictions, permission was sometimes granted to educators who had problems with their laptops and Internet to access the university premises for these items, following appropriate protocols,

Sometimes when the internet is not working in my house or my laptop stops functioning, I take permission from the Dean to go to campus to deliver my lessons through zoom, which is helping me a lot. The internet on campus is better and I also feel comfortable using the laptop. (E4)

*Creating conducive environment.* Participants mentioned the need to create a suitable space at home to support online teaching. They explained that until a lecturer can manage this, it would be difficult to engage in effective teaching from home,

You should be able to create a space for yourself at home where you can do your online teaching and that is what I did. For me, my kids are always home so I need to have a proper place to conduct my zoom lectures so when my children are playing in the sitting room, I move to another room, lock the door and start my zoom classes. That way, you are not interrupted by the noisy environment. (E15)

*Moodle training.* The educators who attended the training organised by the Moodle team, acknowledged the usefulness, in equipping them with the skills to set online quizzes, in a way that could minimise cheating,

I think some of the strategies the Moodle administration taught were good. They told us to set quizzes online which will be difficult for students to copy. I have done this and used case scenarios that are similar to real life practical situations, so that way, students think outside the box and the exams are not compromised. (E9)

*Skills acquisition.* The thought of acquiring new skills by using various online platforms, for teaching, served as a source of motivation for respondents. Thus, many have explored other

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communication media to deliver relevant information to students and regarded this as an important skillset,

One thing that is motivating me in this online teaching is the fact that I am building my skills since this is my first time. So, working from home is teaching me something different like using other forms of communication media like zoom, viber and facebook to communicate to students. (E18)

*Faculty members' support.* Some of the participants relied on the directives from their colleagues as a form of motivation and were encouraged to move forward, since they were not alone in the COVID-19 crisis.

When I face challenges, sometimes I ask my colleagues what to do. The other thing is when you know that you are not the only person going through teaching challenges during this COVID-19 pandemic, it lessens your burden. This keeps me going because we are all facing similar issues like the internet going off and students not taking online classes seriously. (E20)

*Information technology support.* The support received on how to access the Moodle page, banner and Internet services, was considered relevant to online teaching. One of the respondents' explained accordingly,

I will say the IT team is also helping us a lot to make the online teaching possible. Sometimes I find it difficult logging into the system to access my Moodle page and banner and I call for their support because I know they understand better how this system works. Even when I am not able to access my internet, I call them for assistance and they are sometimes able to help me out. (E14)

The facilitators and enablers to online teaching included IT support, training provided by the Moodle team, creating conducive environment, providing free Internet, skills acquisition, support from colleagues and flexibility in teaching.

#### *Improvement techniques/strategies*

*Modifying course outline.* Effective teaching does not only depend on the delivery of information by educators but also the response they get from students. As such, revising the course outlines, to include the allocated marks for various course components, as recommended by respondents, could improve students' attitudes towards online classes and enhance online teaching,

Presently our course outlines are designed in a face-to-face mode, so we do not have marks allocated for each topic. If you do not have marks allocated for it, the students never perform because they don't take things seriously and this affects our teaching. (E44)

*Summarising previous lessons.* Participants identified the need for students to provide summaries of previous lessons undertaken, on a weekly basis. This, they believed could enable them to prepare adequately for their subsequent classes and ask relevant questions, to improve teaching and learning outcomes,

I think weekly summary is important, not only forum discussions on Moodle but there should be a weekly summary coming from students so that they can be forced to read the lecture materials and ask relevant questions during classes. This will help us to improve on our delivery. (E14)

*Reducing course load.* The majority of the respondents pointed out the need to reduce their course load, to a maximum of two courses, for effective online teaching. This was due to the additional time and efforts that go into the preparation and delivery of online courses,

Yes, I think the course load needs to be reduced because when it is online, we really have to work very hard since it requires a lot of hours for preparation and more effort to make students understand things. We have to also give many video and stimulation links. So, I don't think anybody should go for more than 2 courses, if you are teaching online. (E10)

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*Adequate assessment tools.* Most of the educators were not satisfied with the current online assessment procedures and suggested for the university authorities to purchase appropriate assessment software, which can prevent students from cheating and improve fairness in examination processes,

What happened is students were copying and sending exams answers to each other but there is a software which can be purchased by the university, to give the fair idea on whether students are cheating during exams. Otherwise, I am not very happy with the way we take the online test and the way the students do it. We try to be flexible by giving them time for their internet connectivity, while they take it to another direction of cheating. (E16)

*Incentives.* Providing incentives, such as, salary top-up to compensate for extra hours of time spent on online teaching and attending to students' educational needs, were mentioned by many educators as essential to boost their morale and give their best to students,

Since online teaching involves using more time and effort, extra money should be added to our salaries, to motivate us and give us the morale to go all out for students'. As lecturers, we spend a lot of time responding to students', sometimes outside working hours. (E40)

*Guidelines enforcement.* Ensuring that students adhere to rules and regulations governing online teaching was deemed necessary. These included, ensuring their full participation and avoiding distractions, since many usually turned off their videos and muted their microphones to engage in other activities, during online classes,

For online classes, it is difficult to control students, but you still have to insist that they all attend the class and also put their cameras on to be sure they are actually listening to the lecture, because some of them just log on, turn off their microphones and do other things. We should develop guidelines on online teaching and make sure the students follow the rules. That's the only way this online teaching will be effective. (E9)

*Regular training.* As many of the educators were experiencing online teaching for the first time, frequent training on using online platforms and conducting online assessment was recommended to enhance their knowledge and skills,

Most of us are not used to online teaching because it happened suddenly, due to COVID-19, so they should be organising training for us frequently on how we can use the online platforms and assess students fairly. (E33)

Participants identified modification of course outlines and summarising lessons as ways of improving online teaching. Additional recommendations included regular training, enforcing online teaching guidelines, reduction in course load, provision of incentives and adequate online assessment tools.

## Discussion

This study explored educators' experiences with online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed online teaching as a new educational experience for the majority of the educators and they were not prepared for this sudden transition. Indeed, these are challenging periods for educators worldwide, as many are trying to adjust to the new practices and challenges of online teaching (Cullen *et al.*, 2019; Gewin, 2020). Therefore, educators in the study area were expected to accept the change and adapt to the current mode of teaching, instead of face-to-face teaching. Theoretically speaking, the unfreezing of the traditional mode of teaching, resulting from COVID-19 uncertainties (Lewin, 1958), has created an opening for educators to search for innovations that can adequately support their teaching, thereby, incorporating resilience into the educational system (Tam and El-Azar, 2020). On the part of management members, the implementation of online teaching in

universities or any higher education institution, needs well-planned strategy, to achieve the intended purpose or guarantee success. In the absence of a well-planned implementation strategy, it's less likely to achieve management expectations and students' needs (Azlan *et al.*, 2020). However, since the process of change in implementing online teaching happened suddenly, due to COVID-19 pandemic, management members could have had limited time to come out with a well thought out strategy that can fully meet the goals of the institution.

Challenges related to difficulties in maintaining students' engagement and assessment, could be attributed to lack of extensive planning and training on online teaching, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have shown that it is challenging to sustain the attention of students during online teaching, which includes countries with advanced use of technology (Cullen *et al.*, 2019). Other scholars have recommended that, synchronous online meetings, involving the full class and well-organised small group meetings can enable students to have a feeling of a stronger sense of connection to their classmates and teachers and maintain engagement with course activities (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). Students should also be encouraged to participate by utilising breakout rooms, polls and white boards during each meeting (Reinholz *et al.*, 2020).

The lack of adequate training for educators in the study area, could have contributed to their preference for face-to-face teaching, making it difficult for them to embrace online teaching. The introduction of online teaching within the university (FNU), represents a change in teaching practice which needed careful management to address the difficulties educators faced in accepting and embracing the concept (online teaching). This calls for a well-designed change management strategy to prepare educators, improve their acceptance and participation level, reduce resistance and ensure an effective use of the online education system (Thurab-Nkhosi, 2018; Mishra *et al.*, 2020).

The home teaching environment made it difficult, especially for female educators, to create work-life balance, making the online teaching stressful and challenging. One of them emphasised by saying, "*I think my only challenge with online teaching is taking care of the children and other family members and teaching at the same time, which is very stressful*". This is in conformity with a study that highlighted the challenges female educators faced in combining their work and other life responsibilities, during the COVID-19 crisis (Farooq *et al.*, 2020). Culturally, the additional role females in Fiji play, extend to their extended families, who usually stay in the same house with them. Current data show unduly higher levels of vulnerability among the indigenous individuals (Power *et al.*, 2020; Lewandowski *et al.*, 2020). This vulnerability is linked to the presence of comorbidities, resulting from multiple families per dwelling, subsequently, increasing the risk of infections (Khatana and Groeneveld, 2020). These vulnerable groups include the Fiji community, with its rich culture and largely communal (Kaholokula *et al.*, 2020; Milner *et al.*, 2020). Socio-cultural issues are of particular interest because apart from the possibility of interfering with online teaching, it affects the implementation of COVID-19 preventive strategies, in the country.

The challenge of accessing a stable Internet at home, experienced by the majority of the educators, is consistent with previous studies that have established the difficulties individuals in developing countries face in accessing quality Internet facilities at home (Barrot *et al.*, 2021; Hamdan *et al.*, 2021). Given the importance of the internet to the successful implementation of online education, any hindrance in accessing quality internet, would not only affect the delivery of educational contents but also the quality of information presented.

The movement restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, compelled educators, in the study area, to replace their practical course components, with videos and simulations, but the level of skills acquisition is not comparable to the actual fieldwork engagement (Howell and Mikeska, 2021; Ipinge *et al.*, 2020). Besides, the simulation exercise was virtually impossible for some of the courses, where real life experience was required for students, possibly creating a gap in the knowledge and skills acquisition of students.

An additional challenge in implementing the change process to online teaching, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, was increased workload. Educators, utilising more teaching hours, with limited knowledge and output from students, resulted in anxiety, stress and dissatisfaction. The non-serious attitudes of students, regarding online classes, make online teaching time-consuming (Nambiar, 2020). Also, symptoms of psychological distress in many academics, is partly due to increased workload, which leads to loss of work-life balance (Bezuidenhout, 2015).

Our study findings further identified facilitators and enablers to online teaching such as teaching flexibility, free Internet access and IT support. Though the educators regarded the possibility of rescheduling their online classes as motivating, this could interfere with the original plans and normal flow of online education. Studies have identified the essence of adhering to appropriate online education regulations and guidelines, for a successful implementation of online programs (Zhou *et al.*, 2020; Rahim, 2020). The provision of free Internet and support from the IT team, enabled educators to conduct their online classes, assess students and respond to their concerns, through regular communication. Although studies have regarded the information technology systems provided by schools as cumbersome and expensive (Thomas and Rogers, 2020), our findings differ, since educators had free Internet access and found it comfortable using their office computers.

Our findings on the need to equip educators with skills to use Moodle, support the claims made by other scholars to include technology-supported teaching in programmes organised for teachers, to build their skills in technology use (Van Der Spoel *et al.*, 2020). However, efforts made by educators to improve their skills on some of the existing technologies and online teaching platforms such as Moodle, Zoom or Viber promote great ingenuity for the continuity of education, in the study area. Apart from acquiring new skills to enhance their career development, these platforms serve as additional resources for training students. The successful implementation of online teaching requires the acceptance and usage of appropriate technologies. Since change does not only affect the technological processes but also the people involved, major attention should be given to the educators in the study area, to ensure that they have the requisite skills for effective online teaching.

Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique opportunity for educators to cooperate and learn from each other by making their resources for online teaching freely available (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). In this study, faculty members shared ideas and supported themselves, which enabled them to cope and manage some of their challenges.

As many educators worldwide are finding ways to adjust to the new routines of virtual teaching (Gewin, 2020), it is necessary to understand various strategies that best suit a particular local context (Mukumbang *et al.*, 2020). Thus, the institution's context is essential to selecting suitable strategies that could possibly lead to success. Therefore, extending online teaching to cover the entire university (FNU), required detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the institution, viewed against its strategies.

Additional strategies to improve online teaching, such as, modifying course outlines and receiving feedback from students, in the form of topic summary, could increase their level of participation and attentiveness during online classes. Researchers have recommended feedback as means of promoting students' participation in online classes (Li *et al.*, 2020).

Another improvement technique was linked to a reduction in the course load. Studies have suggested a healthy workload allocation for online educators which should be incorporated into policy development (Bezuidenhout, 2015). The provision of incentives to compensate educators for additional workload undertaken could serve as a source of motivation and facilitate online teaching. Though fulfilling individuals, it remains one of the best ways to motivate workers and improve their performance (Ponta *et al.*, 2020).

Given the importance of assessment in education and the availability of various technology-enhanced assessment procedures (Khan and Jawaid, 2020), school managers and

relevant authorities should take into consideration the concerns raised by educators, to acquire tools to improve transparency in online assessment. Also, appropriate online teaching guidelines that mandate student attendance in online classes, with their cameras turned on, should be developed and enforced to improve students' participation in online teaching.

The findings of this study have many implications. Firstly, the study has provided an understanding of the challenges FNU educators faced due to the sudden shift to online teaching, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The critical areas that need immediate attention included poor Internet service, inadequate training (making it difficult to maintain students' engagement), increased workload, limited output from students as well as difficulties conducting assessments and teaching practically oriented courses. Although, we do not intend to generalise the findings of this study due to the research methods used, the findings could be useful to universities with comparable learning settings to enhance and improve their online teaching. Secondly, this study's findings provide educators with relevant information on potential strategies or interventions that could be used to improve their online teaching. Lastly, educators, policymakers and relevant stakeholders within the university setting, may use the findings to provide appropriate interventions to address online teaching challenges faced by educators.

### **Strengths and limitations**

This study cannot be generalised because purposive sampling was used to select research participants and the opinions and experiences of participants, differ from one setting to another. However, the findings from this study contain detailed and contextual information on online teaching challenges during COVID-19 and relevant recommendations for improvement.

### **Conclusion**

The sudden shift to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented and exploring educators' experiences is important. Our study findings show that apart from the facilitators and enablers, participants encountered online teaching challenges that need to be addressed by the university authorities and managers. Educators' preference for face-to-face teaching, making it difficult for them to embrace online teaching, calls for an appropriate change management programme to improve their acceptance levels and minimise any form of resistance that may affect the organisational change of migrating to online teaching.

Additional tasks assigned to females in the Fiji community, presents cultural and gender related issues that need to be addressed to improve online teaching among female educators. Also, there is the need for the university authorities and other relevant stakeholders to adopt the improvement strategies proposed by the educators, to enable them to prepare adequately for future emergencies and provide better support for educators involved in online teaching.

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