



Investigating the Experiences of Online Instructors while engaging and empowering non-traditional learners in eCampus

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Received: 1 February 2022 / Accepted: 2 June 2022 / Published online: 27 June 2022
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Abstract

The purpose of the qualitative study was to investigate instructors' experiences of engaging non-traditional learners in eCampus. Online education was rapidly growing in many higher education institutions, especially during the pandemic. However, a high attrition rate could negatively impact student success. Research findings showed that engagement was a significant factor to increase students' online retention. Due to the flexibility and accessibility of online education, there was a high demand among non-traditional learners. However, limited research has been conducted to explore instructors' experiences while engaging non-traditional learners in eCampus. In the general qualitative study, twelve online instructors were recruited, and interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. The findings showed that instructors faced both challenges and opportunities while increasing engagement among non-traditional learners in online programs. These indicated the need for the diversity of course design, relationship and community building, the flexibility of engagement criteria, and the unpredictability of emotional engagement. Institutional support and resources were recommended to improve the future teaching practices and the success of online learners with underrepresented backgrounds.

Keywords eCampus (e-learning campus) · Non-traditional learners · Online education · Online instructors · Student engagement

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1 Introduction

The U.S. higher education institutions have faced a decline in the overall enrollment since 2012. However, the number of enrollments in distance education was constantly growing. From 2012 to 2016, the enrollment rate in distance education grew by 17.2% (Seaman et al., 2018). In 2020, under the influence of coronavirus (COVID-19), a global pandemic, almost every higher education institution in the United States was forced to transition to online education within a short period of time. This situation indicated that online learning would continue growing in higher education in the relatively long term. Online learning had many advantages, such as flexibility, personalization, and accessibility (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Dziuban et al., 2018; Glazatov, 2012; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Because of its advantages in accommodating the needs of diverse student populations, there was a high demand among students from underrepresented backgrounds, particularly, non-traditional learners (Moore et al., 2010; Redmond et al., 2018).

Non-traditional learners were the student populations who embodied diverse learning experiences, skills, preferences, and identities, including adult learners, part-time students, full-time employees, and students without formal educational experiences (Carreiro & Kapitulik, 2010; Jiang & Koo, 2020; Lohr & Haley, 2018). For instance, almost 90% of online students were non-traditional learners in the target e-learning campus (eCampus) (Ren, 2020). Too often, they were underrepresented or underserved in online contexts. Similar to the idea that college access did not guarantee college success, disadvantaged students might not successfully complete their online programs without appropriate support services or learning motivation (Piedra et al., 2014; Sansone et al., 2011; Warf, 2012). As a result, the overall attrition rate of online courses was 10–20% higher than that of on-campus courses (Bawa, 2016; Christensen & Spackman, 2017; Smith, 2010; Tyler-Smith, 2006). However, high attrition rates could be problematic in further extending the gap of educational opportunities and equities among these non-traditional learners. In previous research, engagement was viewed as one of the crucial components to influence students' online learning experiences and persistence, as indicated in motivating learners, reducing learning isolation, and promoting academic achievement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Other scholars further reinforced the advantages of student engagement in solving problems, such as high dropout rates, low participation, and negative learning experiences (Banna et al., 2015; Britt, 2015; Meyer, 2014).

Instructors played an important role in designing and delivering online instruction (Hsieh, 2010; Martin et al., 2018). It is reasonable to highlight their roles in integrating appropriate interventions and strategies to motivate and engage non-traditional learners in online education. Many studies have been conducted to investigate strategies to engage online learners from various perspectives (Bambara et al., 2009; Culver, 2010; Lundberg & Sheridan, 2015; Li & Baker, 2018; Lohmann et al., 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Martin et al., 2018; O'Shea et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018). However, limited studies were available to investigate the experiences of online instructors while increasing engagement among non-traditional learners (Buelow et al., 2018; Lohmann et al., 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In terms of the research gap identified in previous literature, guided by a newly developed online

engagement framework (Redmond et al., 2018), the purpose of this general qualitative study was to further understand the experiences of online instructors while engaging non-traditional learners in eCampus at a Midwestern university. As a result, the findings could be informative for university staff and administrators to better understand the challenges and barriers faced by online instructors. Accordingly, they could provide appropriate support services and professional development opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of online teaching and learning.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Online Learning in Higher Education

With the popularity of the internet and digital devices, online learning has become a growing phenomenon in many contexts (Hsieh, 2010; Kuama & Intharaksa, 2016; Luyt, 2013; Moore, 2014). Online learning, e-learning, online education, and distance education were often used interchangeably in previous literature (Ren, 2020). These terms were defined as web or computer-based courses delivered in a synchronous and/or asynchronous manner in a learning management system (LMS) (Afifi & Alamri, 2014; Moore et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2010). The benefits of online education were well discussed in previous research, including cost-saving, flexibility, personalization, accessibility, and autonomy (Dziuban et al., 2018; Germain-Rutherford & Barbara, 2008; Hew 2016; Kuama & Intharaksa, 2016; Morrison et al., 2010; Ponomareva & Ugnich, 2018). These advantages drove increasing demand for online courses in higher education to accommodate the needs of larger populations, such as non-traditional learners, students with physical disabilities or learning disabilities (Coulter & Mandell, 2012; Lohmann et al., 2018; Moore, 2014; Redmond et al., 2018).

On the contrary, online learning contained its limitations, as demonstrated in digital divides, isolation, and lack of engagement (Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2018). For instance, due to the limited interpersonal interactions and relationships in online courses, learners often felt isolated (Kebritchi et al., 2017). The low degree of social interaction and connection could make a negative impact on students' learning motivations and persistence (Bigatel & Edel-Malizia, 2018; Diep et al., 2019). As a result, the attrition rate of online courses was much higher than that of traditional face-to-face courses (Kebritchi et al., 2017; Moore, 2014; Morrison et al., 2010; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Attrition meant that students could not successfully complete their courses to receive final grades or finish their degree programs to earn diplomas (Moore, 2014; Russo-Gleicher, 2014). The high attrition rate could be problematic at the individual, institutional, and societal levels (Ren, 2020). Thus, it is critical for higher education institutions to address the academic barriers and promote educational equity among underrepresented student populations.

2.2 Non-traditional learners in Online Programs

The flexibility and availability of online learning drove an increasing enrollment of online programs among non-traditional learners at many higher education institutions (Lohr & Haley, 2018; Moore, 2014). Non-traditional learners were often used as a term to cover various types of learners, such as part-time students, full-time employees, students without formal educational experiences, and financially independent students (Carreiro & Kapitulik, 2010; Jiang & Koo, 2020). Amongst these non-traditional learners, a majority of them were adult learners who were over the age of 25. The main purpose of them being enrolled in online programs was to pursue advanced degrees to improve their work competencies and performance (Diep et al., 2019; Sogunro, 2015).

Because of their special characteristics, they had different needs compared to traditional or typical university students (Reichert, 2013). Research showed they faced unique challenges in online courses, such as adopting a student role, balancing their work, personal life, and studies, understanding academic expectations, and maintaining their learning motivations (Diep et al., 2019; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2017). If they were older than 45 years old, they were more likely to experience technology barriers (Meyers & Bagnall, 2015). However, their needs were often underserved at many institutions. Without sufficient support, non-traditional learners would easily feel marginalized and disengaged in online programs. Hence, it is necessary for instructors and administrators to generate effective strategies to sustain the success of non-traditional learners in the e-learning campus (Jiang & Koo, 2020).

2.3 Engaging non-traditional learners in Online Programs

In a self-paced learning environment, learners often lost their motivation and performed some disengaged behaviors, such as procrastination, late submissions, and disconnections (Janakiraman et al., 2018; Sansone et al., 2011). In order to promote and maintain the success of online learners, one of the effective solutions was to increase their engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Tight, 2019). Engagement meant active participation and positive attitudes associated with learning activities. This was regarded as a prerequisite for the growth in students' academic achievement, as indicated in learner experiences and satisfaction (Collins et al., 2019; Dziuban et al., 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Redmond et al., 2018; Tight, 2019) believed that since students have shouldered a financial burden, higher education institutions should be held responsible to enhance student engagement and retention.

An online engagement framework was developed to guide online course design and development, including: "social engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, collaborative engagement, and emotional engagement" (Redmond et al., 2018, p. 189). Social engagement referred to learners' social investment in online courses, including social interactions, learning communities, social networking, and social presence (Imlawi et al., 2015; Redmond et al., 2018). In an isolating environment, social presence was fundamental to building a community where learners could develop personal connections and feel "a sense of respect, support, and trust" (Diep et al., 2019, p. 227; Dolan et al., 2017). Online discussion, open communica-

tion, social media, emails, and videoconferencing software could be used to promote interactions among learners and instructors (Imlawi et al., 2015; Lohmann et al., 2018; Lohr & Haley, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Cognitive engagement, or intellectual engagement, referred to psychological investments to develop deep understanding, critical thinking, and transferrable skills (Dolan et al., 2017; Redmond et al., 2018). Research showed that non-traditional learners needed more instructional and cognitive support in online courses (Allen et al., 2016). The integration of learners' prior experiences was critical for them to build connections between the content and environment (Lohr & Haley, 2018). Contextualized problem-based learning and knowledge relevancy could be used to promote the application of learned knowledge in real-world situations (Buelow et al., 2018; Dolan et al., 2017).

Behavioral engagement, or learning presence, aimed to increase the active role that learners played in online learning activities (Redmond et al., 2018). In a self-directed learning environment, learners could enjoy more autonomy to choose their learning paces and paths. Instructors could play as a facilitator to encourage learners' active participation by providing clear guidance and instructions in online courses. Interactive activities and well-designed assessments, such as scenario-based problems, hands-on assignments, and reflective activities, could be used as effective strategies to advance this type of engagement.

Collaborative engagement highlighted the importance of collaboration and teamwork among learners and instructors to build relationships and networking in supporting learning experiences. For instance, instructors could apply group projects, team presentations, and discussion forums to promote collaborative engagement.

Emotional engagement, or emotional presence, referred to learners' reactions to their learning experiences, as indicated in negative and positive feelings (Redmond et al., 2018). Non-traditional learners would need more emotional support in online courses because of their unique characteristics (Jiang & Koo, 2020). For instance, affective communications could be helpful to build positive relationships among instructors and learners, such as timely feedback, clear instructions, and the availability and accessibility of instructors (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2017). Other support services, such as technical assistance and academic support, would be effective to reduce their anxiety in online courses (Diep et al., 2019; Meyers & Bagnall, 2015).

3 Methodology

Qualitative research was mainly used to collect descriptive data from a small number of participants, with an aim to deeply understand a situation or a culture (Creswell, 2012; Patton 2015). In qualitative studies, researchers highlighted the value of participants' experiences and perceptions in comprehensively exploring and describing a phenomenon to address the research questions (Glesne, 2016; Gerber et al., 2016; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2010). In terms of the research purpose, a general qualitative study was a good fit to answer the research question: what have instructors experienced while engaging non-traditional learners in eCampus?

3.1 Research setting and Population

The research was conducted at a large-sized public research university. In the past few years, the university has been facing a rapid growth of online courses and programs in their eCampus, an e-learning campus to deliver undergraduate, graduate, certificate programs, and noncredit courses. From 2013 to 2019, the enrollment of eCampus constantly grew by 58.4%. By Fall 2018, 90% of these students were non-traditional learners who did not follow a traditional pathway as their full-time on-campus peers (Ren, 2020). The potential participants were instructors of eCampus who met the following selection criteria, including: (1) the participants have offered online courses in eCampus, and (2) the participants were expected to have at least one year of online teaching experience.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Triangulation is often used to increase the credibility and validity of research findings, as indicated in method, investigator, theory, and data source (Carter et al., 2014; Gerber et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Based on the research purpose, individual interviews and document analysis were utilized as instruments to collect data from multiple perspectives and sources. After obtaining the IRB approval, I started with purposeful sampling and then utilized snowball sampling to recruit more participants (Creswell, 2017; Glesne, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Finally, I sent invitation emails to around 35 instructors from diverse academic backgrounds who met the criteria.

The research was conducted before the pandemic; thus, I scheduled face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews with the participants. In the interview protocol, some of the predefined questions contained (Ren, 2020): (Perceptions) what does student engagement in online courses mean to you, how do you evaluate student engagement in online courses; (Effective Experiences) can you share/describe some scenarios where you have increased online engagement, what are your suggestions to new online instructors who want to increase student engagement; (Ineffective Experiences) what are the challenges that you often face when promoting student engagement in online courses, can you share/describe some situations where you failed to increase student engagement in online courses. Each interview, lasting about one hour, was conducted in a quiet and private space with the participant and was audio-recorded for future transcription. I also collected documents/artifacts from their online courses, such as course modules on the LMS, screenshots of learning activities or assessments, and other instructional materials. Participant recruitment was completed when there was no new insight appeared during the data collection (also known as data saturation) (Creswell, 2014). Eventually, twelve instructors were recruited for the study.

I transcribed the interviews and provided thick descriptions of the documents for further analysis. Coding was a process to discover and make sense of the data. Therefore, two cycles of coding were used to interpret data and categorize them into appropriate themes (Saldaña, 2016). For instance, in the first cycle, I applied initial coding to code data in an open-ended manner to identify potential patterns and key concepts.

In the second cycle, I utilized pattern coding to cluster the codes from the first cycle to generate meaningful themes to address the research question.

4 Findings

Twelve instructors who participated in the study were from diverse academic backgrounds, including English ($n=1$), human services ($n=1$), teacher education ($n=1$), policy and leadership ($n=1$), special education ($n=1$), nursing ($n=1$), social work ($n=1$), public health ($n=1$), higher education ($n=2$), and consumer sciences ($n=2$). Table 1 indicates the detailed information of the participants.

After analyzing the interview transcripts and document descriptions, four themes were generated to address instructors' perceptions and experiences of engaging non-traditional learners in eCampus, as indicated in the need for the diversity of course design, relationship and community building, engagement with flexible criteria, and the unpredictability of emotional engagement.

4.1 Theme #1 the diversity of Course Design

In an isolated online course, the communications among instructors and learners were often delayed, which made online course adjustment difficult. The instructors believed that online courses were not organic but highly structured. To accommodate the needs of non-traditional learners with various backgrounds, the instructors highlighted the importance of diversity in course design. For instance, an instructor in policy and leadership mentioned that “I front-loaded all potential issues that might impact the learning process in course design and made some assumptions about my online learners and anticipated their needs and learning styles.” They wanted to ensure courses were accessible to all types of online learners, as demonstrated in the comprehensiveness of course content and the multiplicity of representations. Many participants ($n=9$) believed in the need of using multimedia learning resources to accommodate various learning preferences of students. Likewise, in their online

Table 1 Summaries of participant background information

Participant ID	Academic field	Online Teaching Experience	Class Size
A	Higher Education	3	35
B	Policy & Leadership	10	20
C	Special Education	3	25
D	Nursing	12	25*4
E	Human Services	5	25
F	Consumer Sciences	4	15
G	Teacher Education	1.5	30
H	Public Health	2	20
I	English	1	15
J	Consumer Sciences	1	25
K	Higher Education	3	30
L	Social Work	5	45

courses, these instructors tried to “supply articles or credible websites that give the information in a different way, include audio or video recordings of the content and PowerPoints with voiceover, provide something printable for students to read and make notes, use graphics or illustrations, and embed YouTube videos or Ted Talks.” Others ($n=3$), such as an instructor in human services, also mentioned the importance of providing supplementary resources to accommodate the needs of learners with disabilities, such as “using assistive technologies, like screen magnification and readers, to make the course content and files readable and offering multiple presentations for the same content, including written texts, visuals, and audios.” In addition, many instructors ($n=8$) utilized a variety of assessments to evaluate students’ understanding of the subject, including “project-based activities, scenario-based problems, case analyses, presentations, writing summary, and reflections.” Other participants ($n=3$), such as an instructor in teacher education, stated the importance of providing students with different choices, as indicated in “a choice of a topic for the discussion, a day or time for the virtual meeting, and a choice of media to communicate.”

However, because of the limitations of online teaching, the participants ($n=12$) believed online course preparation “was more taxing and took a lot of extra work and more effort.” For instance, they needed to take various types of learners into consideration while designing instructional materials to accommodate their uniqueness. Especially, they tried to “be more creative to capture students’ attention by having different activities in each module and using various strategies alternatively.” If the instructors were “too busy doing other things, such as service to the institution or doing research,” all of these responsibilities would influence their commitments to the diversity of course preparation. Therefore, the increase of student engagement among non-traditional learners could be challenging when more effort was needed to promote the diversity of online course design and preparation.

4.2 Theme #2 the necessity of relationship and community building

The participants ($n=12$) believed online learning “was a very lonely journey for students, and the disconnection from the students made it hard to connect with them on a personal level, and students did not have a sense of belonging or sense of community. As a result, it was so easy for them (non-traditional learners) to drop out.” To retain non-traditional learners and support them to achieve positive academic experiences in online courses, the instructors stated the importance of building a learning community through applying various strategies to increase learner interaction and communication. For instance, the participants in special education, public health, and policy and leadership stated that.

In introduction activities, students could spend time getting to know one another. In discussion forums, students could express their understanding of different perspectives, have a little deeper conversation with their peers, give thoughtful feedback, and provide additional resources to support each other. In group work, students could collaborate with each other to complete the team-based projects, such as group presentations and research activities.

Additionally, in the thick description of their online courses, these instructors “offered online office hours, sent check-in emails or announcements, and provided an immediate and substantial amount of feedback to students.” The availability and accessibility of instructors were important to build relationships and increase interactions between learners and instructors.

However, many participants ($n=10$) expressed the difficulties in increasing online connections and interactions. For example, an instructor from the higher education program said that “I had to show my students I was always there and available as much as possible. As a result, I had to spend more time reaching out to students both as the whole class and individually.” Some of them mentioned ($n=5$) that “it was very time-consuming to communicate with students to constantly show my presence, especially in a large class.” In order to provide timely feedback and responses, the participant in consumer sciences said that “I spent more time for online courses in responding to students’ emails and found myself doing emails late at night to meet their needs.” One participant in policy and leadership stated that “students were reserved and inhibited in online courses; thus, the conversations without body language and facial expressions were no longer natural.” Others ($n=3$) believed that, in synchronous online sessions, “it was hard for the students who had full-time jobs to come in on one time to meet during the weekdays; otherwise, meeting during evenings or weekends would affect my and learners’ personal life.” Therefore, the increase of student engagement among non-traditional learners could be demanding if large time commitments were needed when building online communities.

4.3 Theme #3 the flexibility of Engagement Criteria

In online courses, the participants viewed student engagement among non-traditional learners with the similar indicators. For instance, the indicators of the student-to-content interaction showed that students “were interested in the subject matter, invested quality time in course materials and learning activities, and actively checked what they needed to do.” The student-to-student interaction indicators included: students “actively took part in interaction activities, built connections with their classmates, asked for help from their classmates, made contributions to the group work, and joined conversations in discussion forums.” The student-to-faculty interaction was indicated by: students “sent a lot of emails based on the reading or what they have submitted, asked questions about course content or assignments, expressed their interest in specific topics and wanted to have a further conversation, carefully read the comments or feedback, and asked for further guidance on what was not done well.”

However, these online instructors believed that “their (non-traditional learners’) responsibility outside of the course would influence the success of their online learning.” For example, an instructor from the nursing program mentioned that “these students often had other responsibilities, which were much different usually than the students that we had here on campus.” When online office hours were offered, it could demonstrate student engagement if learners actively and voluntarily participated in these sessions. However, if no one showed up, it did not mean “an absolute absence of engagement [among non-traditional learners], probably they did not have time or

did not have questions.” Other instructors ($n=5$) mentioned that “the background of the students varied a lot. Students who were busy with other commitments or lacked learning skills were always kind of behind everyone else.” Some instructors ($n=4$) also pointed out the limitations of using discussion boards to indicate student engagement among non-traditional learners. For instance, an instructor in higher education viewed discussions as optional because “students were forced to do discussions, and it (discussion) was not authentic, and students knew it.” Thus, because of special situations that non-traditional learners experienced, instructors were expected to understand their unique needs and view their engagement from flexible perspectives.

4.4 Theme #4 the unpredictability of Emotional Engagement

A majority of the participants ($n=10$) believed that emotional engagement was hard to judge online. They said that “I had no clue about their emotions and could not see their (students) emotions. Understanding their motivation was difficult.” Furthermore, emotion could be influenced by multiple factors, which could not be effectively controlled by the instructors. For instance, in different subjects, some of the students were anxious when dealing with statistical problems, and others “were not interested in the dry content or easily got bored when learning about theories or policies.” Other participants in teacher education and special education mentioned that “students might have a good motivation in the beginning but fade out in the end, or they simply had a bad day.” Some participants in higher education also realized that a few of their students “often expressed their concerns or negative attitudes towards online education in general and felt frustrated if they were struggling with technology problems.” In terms of various learning activities or assignments, the instructor in social work said “not every student was happy with that, or not everyone was going to be into the activities the way others were.” Other instructors ($n=4$) believed that negative attitudes associated with the quizzes or tests did not mean negative learning outcomes. Instead, these methods could be used as an effective way to assess learners’ understanding. Therefore, emotion was perceived as a complicated component, which could lead to unpredictable “side effects” among online learners.

However, the instructors agreed with the need of providing support to engage non-traditional learners emotionally in online courses. For instance, some instructors in higher education, policy and leadership, teacher education, and consumer sciences mentioned “to avoid the situation where students felt overwhelmed in online courses, I would decrease their workloads by moving away from books and heavy reading, reducing some unnecessary learning activities and assignments, breaking all content into tiny chunks, and providing the content in a manageable segment.” Furthermore, they believed in the necessity of providing clear guidance and tutorials “to help students navigate the online course platform.” A well-organized course structure was also critical to decrease learners’ confusion. For example, these instructors stated “the ease to navigate and locate the information was important, and students would not feel frustrated looking for stuff.” Moreover, other participants ($n=6$) discussed the drawbacks of relying on lecturing to deliver information. They said that “lecturing was passive for students, so it was easy for them (online students) to get bored.” According to the thick description of the online course modules provided by these

instructors, to catch students' attention, they integrated graphic design elements and multimedia learning resources into their online courses. For instance, some participants ($n=5$) added headings in the document, embedded course banners, and customized the navigation bar. Others ($n=3$) utilized videos, infographics, visualizations, illustrations, storytelling, and animations to engage students emotionally. Therefore, emotion, as a “behind the scenes” element, played an influential role in students' online learning experiences. Although emotion was often unpredictable from instructors' perspectives, instructors still tried their best to design their courses to increase positive attitudes among non-traditional learners.

5 Discussions

With the growth of online learning in higher education, non-traditional learners are taking advantage of the benefits to gain educational opportunities. Non-traditional learners often represent diverse learning preferences and experiences but are underserved in higher education. It is necessary for instructors and university administrators to build an accessible and inclusive learning community to accommodate the uniqueness of these learners (Devlin & McKay, 2018; Haring-Smith, 2012). The finding of the diversity of course design is consistent with previous research that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles could potentially be used to overcome the barriers experienced by non-traditional learners in online courses (Elias, 2010; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2017). These design principles highlight the significance of adaptability and multiplicity in generating and obtaining knowledge in three areas: representation, action and expression, and engagement (King-Sears, 2009; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2017). For instance, instructors could consider integrating multimedia instructional materials, different learning options, various assessment strategies, and flexible communication opportunities to promote students' learning outcomes (Buelow et al., 2018; Lohmann et al., 2018). The multiplicity and variability of pedagogical methods could increase learner autonomy to foster student-centered and personalized learning experiences (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2017). Therefore, the diversity of course design is crucial to increasing cognitive and behavioral engagement among non-traditional learners.

Due to the limited interpersonal relationships in online courses, learners often lack a sense of belonging, which could make a negative impact on students' learning experiences and outcomes (Kebritchi et al., 2017). The finding of the necessity of relationship and community building is also consistent with previous studies that instructors need to apply strategies to increase learner interaction and personal rapports in online courses, such as group projects, interactive activities, instructor social presence, and online communication opportunities (Buelow et al., 2018; Hsieh, 2010; Lohmann et al., 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Hence, relationship and community building are an essential factor to promote social and collaborative engagement among non-traditional learners.

However, the participants faced some challenges while engaging non-traditional learners in eCampus. The “dilemmas” experienced by instructors during the course design, development, and delivery are also supported by previous studies. For

instance, research findings showed online pedagogy is more complex than face-to-face instruction (Buelow et al., 2018; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Oomen-Early & Murphy, 2009; Redmond et al., 2018). Online instructors always spent more time on course preparation and put more effort into fostering social interactions and learning motivations than those in in-person courses (Diep et al., 2019; Hsieh, 2010; Wingo et al., 2017). Therefore, institutional support is critical to address these challenges by providing sufficient staffing support, professional guidance, and resources (Halupa, 2019). For example, instructional designers could provide support in course development plans, pedagogical strategies, technical assistance, and professional development. Multimedia specialists could provide support in the development of multimedia instructional materials.

Non-traditional learners have unique experiences and identities. For instance, they have to handle work and life commitments while pursuing their online degrees. After understanding their special characteristics, the instructors were able to assess learner engagement with flexible criteria. Previous research indicated the importance of cultural sensitivity in promoting culturally inclusive learning communities (Germain-Rutherford & Barbara, 2008). Instructors are expected to be sensitive to culturally diverse experiences, identities, and preferences among their online learners. As a result, online instructors could rely on different indicators to understand whether their students had meaningful interactions with the content, peers, and instructors. Instead of using these indicators as exclusive criteria, instructors should be flexible to view student engagement by taking other factors into consideration, such as their learning skills, socioeconomic status, and time commitments. Therefore, it is recommended that instructors could conduct learner analyses to better understand the uniqueness of non-traditional learners before implementing effective interventions to promote their success, such as increasing the accessibility, usability, and relevancy of course content and learning activities as well as the multiplicity and adaptability of communication and assessment methods.

The finding of the unpredictability of emotional engagement is also consistent with previous studies. Because of the complex nature of emotion, online learners often expressed mixed attitudes (Jiang & Koo, 2020). However, positive emotions were essential to foster the success of online learning (Collins et al., 2019; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Research findings showed several factors that could make a negative impact on student engagement, such as heavy course workload, general discussion questions, disorganized course structure, and late feedback from instructors (Buelow et al., 2018; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2017). These online instructors applied various strategies to increase positive attitudes among non-traditional learners, as demonstrated in clear instructions, a well-organized course structure, a decrease in workload, and the integration of multimedia learning materials. Meanwhile, owing to the invisibility and complexity of emotional engagement, the instructors were more likely to view emotion as a “behind the scenes” element in course design and delivery. Although it is not guaranteed to produce positive attitudes among online learners, instructors are expected to realize the importance of emotional presence and support in maintaining successful learning experiences among non-traditional learners (Jiang & Koo, 2020). It is expected that institutions could provide support services and resources

to increase learner emotional engagement, such as technology and academic support (Diep et al., 2019; Meyers & Bagnall, 2015).

6 Limitations and Implications

The study has some limitations. For instance, the purpose of the research was to investigate learner engagement from online instructors' perspectives, which might limit the interpretation of student engagement in online learning contexts. Future research is needed to include the voices of other parties, such as non-traditional learners and student support staff. The non-traditional learner is a broad term to represent various types of learners who are not typical university students. Each of them might face unique challenges in online courses. Thus, other researchers could explore the practices to address the needs of a specific type of non-traditional learners, such as returning adults or learners without formal school experiences. In terms of the diversity of learners in online environments, further research could focus on instructors' perceptions and experiences of engaging other groups of learners, such as international students and students with physical disabilities or learning disabilities. Some instructors mentioned online teaching was a lonely and isolating enterprise. Further research could be conducted to understand the best practices to increase faculty involvement and engagement in online instruction. Due to the influence of COVID-19, researchers and educators further recognized the significance of effective online teaching practices in promoting student success in remote instruction. Other researchers could investigate pedagogical strategies used to maintain student engagement during and after the transition.

The research findings also indicate several implications for future teaching practices and institutional support and resources. For instance, the faculty support center could provide professional development workshops to train faculty about effective teaching practices to engage learners with underrepresented backgrounds in online programs, such as culturally responsive teaching, UDL, and social presence. Moreover, online instructors could collaborate with other professionals, such as online facilitators, instructional designers, and subject librarians, to alleviate the challenges faced by them while engaging non-traditional learners. The role that instructors play in advancing student engagement could be limited without appropriate support services; thus, there is a need for institutions to improve their services in technical assistance, instructional consultations, online tutoring, and academic advising. Faculty teaching communities and institutional repositories are also needed to share the best practices and available resources to support teaching excellence in e-learning campuses.

7 Conclusions

With the rapid growth of online programs in higher education, non-traditional learners are benefiting from the affordability, accessibility, and flexibility of online instruction to pursue their degrees. However, they are often underserved in higher education.

Instructors often play an essential role in course design, development, and delivery. It is necessary for institutions to understand instructors' perceptions and experiences while engaging non-traditional students before providing support services to advance their teaching excellence. The findings of this general qualitative research showed these online instructors faced both challenges and opportunities while increasing student engagement among non-traditional learners in eCampus. These were indicated through the diversity of course design, the necessity of relationship and community building, the flexibility of engagement criteria, and the unpredictability of emotional engagement.

In conclusion, with a high demand for online education among non-traditional learners in higher education, from institutional perspectives, it is crucial to increase the quality of online programs to engage and retain these learners. However, there is no “one size fits all” practice for instructors and administrators to increase student engagement in various online contexts. Online instructors need to acknowledge the specialty of online education and understand the uniqueness of their online learners. They are expected to be open-minded, culturally competent, empathic, creative, flexible, and considerate while integrating appropriate pedagogical practices and emerging technologies to engage their learners with diverse backgrounds. Meanwhile, university administrators need to further improve institutional support services and resources to not only promote faculty involvement in online teaching excellence but also sustain student success in online programs.

Statements and Declarations

Competing Interests The author declares that there is no conflict of interest pertaining to this research, and no funding was received for conducting this study.

Compliance with Ethical Standards The study has been approved by the Office of Research Compliance at the author's institution with the level of exempt. All procedures performed in the study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution research committee at the author's institution. Informed consents were obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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