Research Article

Adapting to the Digital Age: An Evaluation of Online Learning Strategies in Public Health and Social Care Education

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Introduction. The global shift towards digital education in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the landscape of higher education. Public health and social care programmes have adapted to this transformation, embracing online learning strategies to engage students. This study focuses on the assessment of online learning experiences in public health and social care education, particularly during the post-COVID-19 period. *Materials and Methods*. This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 49 university students in England. These phases, conducted both in person and via video, were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. A purposive sampling technique was employed to gather data, and framework analysis facilitated data management and interpretation. *Results*. The presentation highlights three main themes and 12 accompanying sub-themes that capture the clear preferences of students for both in-person and online learning methods. The findings elucidate the merits and demerits of online learning strategies in contrast to traditional face-to-face classes. Online classes offer distinct advantages in terms of flexibility, cost-effectiveness, time efficiency, and technological proficiency. However, they also bring to the fore concerns related to social isolation, mental health challenges, technical challenges, and distractions within the home environment. *Conclusion*. Considering the global transition to digital education, this study contributes to the dynamic discourse surrounding online learning in the post-COVID-19 era. The diverse preferences expressed by students highlight the importance of personalised and flexible teaching methods in online education, underlining the need for adaptability and inclusivity to meet the diverse needs of today's learners.

1. Introduction

Humanity has been greatly influenced by several pandemics throughout the history [1]. The initial instance of coronavirus (COVID-19) was documented in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 [2]. Consequently, the global pandemic has led to the infection of millions of individuals and caused a significant number of deaths worldwide, as reported by the World Health Organization in 2020 [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic has unquestionably transformed the lives of individuals worldwide, and it had a significant impact on the field of education, mainly in higher education sector [4]. The vast majority of individuals worldwide who are seeking higher education have been significantly impacted by the most

serious global pandemic to afflict the human population in more than a century. The proliferation of the virus, coupled with government interventions and the immediate consequences of the pandemic, led to a fundamental change in traditional schooling, requiring a transition to a virtual setting. University students encountered substantial obstacles when the shift to online and mixed learning methods occurred expeditiously [5]. As per the United Nations [6], the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted almost 1.6 billion students worldwide. More precisely, the closure of schools has affected 94% of the global student population, and this figure increases to 99% for students in low- and lower-middle-income nations. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UK institutions created learning resources as part of their shift to blended learning

for the 2020/2021 academic year [4]. This was intermingled with times of exclusively virtual distribution, coinciding with nationwide lockdowns.

The present investigation was initiated in response to the COVID-19 preventative measures implemented in universities, which required a transition to online and mixed modes of learning. As a result of implementing shielding and social distance techniques, the conventional approaches to learning and teaching, such as attending in-person classes, became impractical. Hodges et al. [7] argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the transition towards digital and mixed learning. Additionally, they emphasise the significance of differentiating between emergency remote instruction and online learning. Despite the relaxation of lockdown measures, online and blended learning are expected to continue in certain regions of the world. This presents specific difficulties in guaranteeing accessibility and involvement for university students from all segments of society. A digital gap is present, aligning with preexisting socioeconomic disparities. Online and hybrid learning and teaching have the potential to exacerbate the marginalisation of already disadvantaged populations.

1.1. Online Learning in Public Health and Social Care Education. Online learning has gained a significant importance in the realm of public health and social care education [8, 9]. Global institutions are embracing the digital era and implementing innovative online learning solutions for public health and social care education. Online learning can enhance accessibility, flexibility, and engagement, leading to improved academic achievements, increased student contentment, and the acquisition of essential knowledge. It also provides opportunities for networking and sharing best practices among students and industry experts. The current study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of various online learning strategies in these fields, their advantages and disadvantages, and suggest ways to modify and enhance them to better meet the changing needs of students. School-based health education programmes can achieve maximum effectiveness and accessibility by utilising interactive online and web-based tactics, as well as social media choices. The COVID-19 pandemic has made online learning essential for uninterrupted education in these fields. Current developments in digital education for public health and social care include incorporating interactive multimedia materials, gamification, virtual reality simulations, and mobile learning apps to improve student involvement, provide interactive learning experiences, and offer practical application and skill development in a digital setting.

1.2. Aim. The study aimed to enhance higher education quality and availability by examining online learning experiences, identifying obstacles, and understanding students' preferences. It further aims to develop strategies for student engagement and diversity, based on a thorough analysis of experiences and preferences.

1.3. Research Methods. This study is part of a larger mixed-methods research project that utilised a variety of data collection methods, including surveys ($n = 121$). However, for the current manuscript, we will focus solely on the qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews ($n = 49$) and focus group discussions (FGD) ($n = 3$, with eight participants each). By analysing this data, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of student experiences with online learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve into individual student experiences with online learning during the post-COVID-19 period. This data laid the groundwork for subsequent focus group discussions, each lasting approximately 1 hr. These discussions were designed to explore shared experiences, group dynamics, and social norms related to online learning. The duration was sufficient to achieve saturation in our study. Focus groups played a crucial role in facilitating group discussions, allowing shared perspectives and collective insights to emerge. These insights might not have been evident in individual interviews. While the semi-structured interviews offered detailed information and the opportunity to probe specific areas, the focus groups promoted participant interaction and the surfacing of fresh perspectives. By integrating these methods, our objective was to gain a more holistic understanding of student perspectives on the benefits, drawbacks, and preferences associated with online learning. The institutional ethical approval was gained from Regent College London prior to the data collection.

1.4. Recruitment and Data Collection. Participants are recruited from the School of Health and Sports Science (SHSS) at Regent College London, England, where enrolment spans various public health and social care programmes. These programmes emphasise digital and blended learning methodologies and are delivered in collaboration with several esteemed universities in the UK. The institution was purposely chosen for its digital-first strategy in education, offering a wide range of instructional resources accessible through various electronic platforms. The school's flexible online class scheduling, including morning, evening, and weekend sessions, allows students to balance academic pursuits with professional obligations. The participants were selected via purposive sampling that involved considering a range of variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, occupation, work habits, health condition, and caregiving responsibilities. The researchers investigated the relationship between socioeconomic and health inequalities and the accessibility and proficiency of online and blended learning. Prior to conducting face-to-face interviews and focus groups, the participants were duly briefed about the study and were given consent forms to sign. Data collection for this research was carried out between January and October 2023. The interviews were performed either face-to-face or via the use of Microsoft Teams, facilitated by experienced researchers. A topic guide was developed to direct the conversations, drawing upon literature, the research team's expertise, and comments from the student advisory group (SAG). The interviews and focus groups adhered to a standardised topic structure, which facilitated adaptable conversation. The material was digitally captured and transcribed, reaching redundancy when further participants did not provide any new data.

1.5. Data Analysis. The study team utilised the framework analysis approach to analyse the data, promoting collaborative sharing of data among team members [10]. The framework method is well-suited for conducting thematic analysis of textual

data, particularly interview transcripts. This method enables researchers to systematically compare and contrast data based on themes across multiple cases while also maintaining the contextual linkages of each perspective to other aspects within individual accounts [11]. With its clear procedural steps, the framework method yields structured outputs that summarise the data effectively. It has been widely employed across various contexts, predominantly in healthcare research [12] but also in educational studies such as investigations into student performance [13]. Periodic team meetings, conducted both in physical presence and on virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams, were conducted to deliberate on coding matters and the progressive development of the codebook. Detailed records were kept during the project, including research diaries to retain reflective interview notes and developing analytical viewpoints. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the data, researchers conducted a meticulous examination of the interview transcripts in conjunction with corresponding reflection notes. During the initial coding step, a selection of the original transcripts was separately coded by two researchers. The finalised codebook was distributed across the entire team. The Student Advisory Group assessed analytical concepts and provided alternate perspectives. The QSR NVivo 12 software was utilised to provide the ultimate analytical framework to every transcript [14]. The researchers carefully and methodically reviewed and reread each transcript, meticulously choosing and marking important parts and giving appropriate codes. After completing the coding procedure, researchers arranged the data in a matrix arrangement using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The procedure discerned three principal themes and 12 sub-themes, which were shaped by the original study goals and derived via inductive reasoning based on the data. The study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist to guarantee the comprehensiveness and dependability of the research findings [15].

1.6. Results. A sample consisting of 49 students who were registered in the public health and social care course was selected from three distinct cohorts. Table 1 presents a concise summary of the demographic attributes of the pupils. The interviews varied in duration, spanning from 30 to 57 min, with an average length of 43.5 min. The interviews were done exclusively via the Microsoft Teams platform and were videotaped with the participants' explicit consent. The focus group session was held using the Microsoft Teams platform and lasted around 1 hr.

Throughout the duration of this study, a comprehensive analysis unveiled numerous overarching themes and subthemes, as illustrated in Figure 1. These themes encapsulate both the benefits and challenges encountered by students participating in online education, as well as offer insights into the prospective trajectory of online education.

2. Benefits of Online Classes

Online classes have several benefits that have contributed to their growing popularity as an educational medium. Students have identified numerous significant advantages, as outlined below.

TABLE 1: Demographic of students interviewed.

	Number
Age	
18–24	7
25–34	17
35–44	15
45–54	10
Gender	
Male	13
Female	36
Ethnicity	
White	39
Black or Black British	6
Mixed	4

2.1. Balancing Work, Life, and Caregiving. Online classes provide students with the opportunity to effectively manage their educational endeavours with other personal obligations, such as employment and familial duties, promoting a harmonious equilibrium in their lives. Their versatility enables a seamless integration of education into their general lifestyle, fostering a well-rounded and satisfying existence. Online classes offer a crucial support system for students who have childcare or other caregiving obligations, enabling them to effectively manage their time. The flexibility of online learning helps these students to manage their time effectively, merging their educational interests smoothly with their caregiving activities.

> *Taking classes online helps us study, work, care for family, and do our jobs. Being able to stay home saves us time and stress. Having less worry and more time for ourselves is better than having to deal with trains.* Interview participant 21, male, 51-year-old.

> *Online lessons are a God send if you have a disabled child.* Interview participant 39, female, 34-year-old.

2.2. Remote Access. Online courses enable students to participate in classes from any location worldwide, surpassing geographical limitations and providing flexibility. This guarantees that high-quality education is readily available and encompasses a wide range of individuals, without being limited by geographical limitations. Online classrooms accommodate a heterogeneous student body, with certain students favouring in-person engagement on campus, while others get advantages from the adaptability of recorded sessions that may be accessed based on their own schedules and preferences.

> *If you are, if you are away, you're not in London, you can be online from your own country, from Romania, from Bulgaria, from different places. So you can be present to attend the lesson.* FGD participant 38, female, 37-year-old.
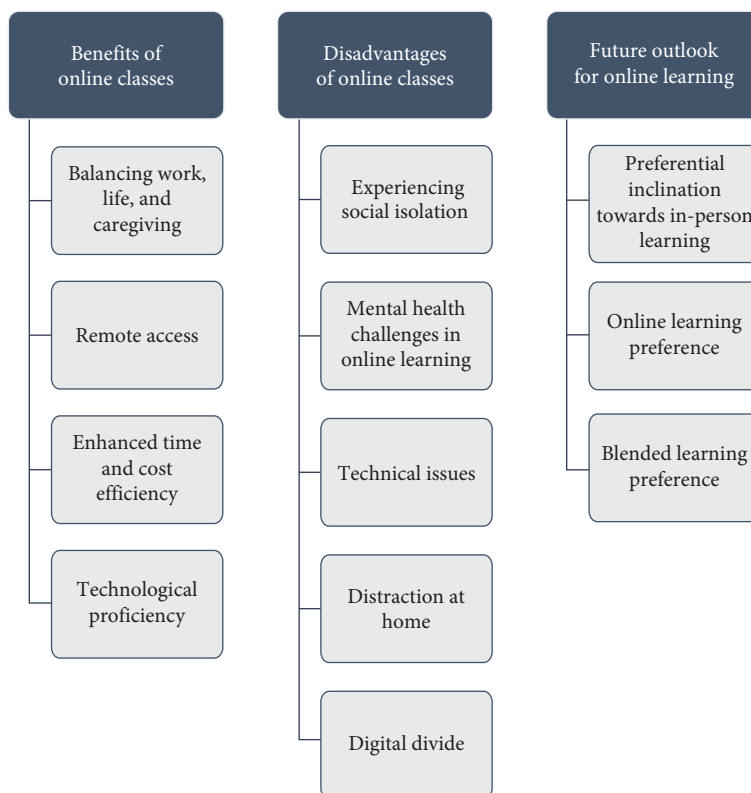
FIGURE 1: Thematic map: major themes and sub-themes.

Freedom and flexibility are distinguishing features of online programmes, providing an unequalled level of ease and convenience. Students have the ability to conveniently access course materials, communicate with instructors, and participate in discussions with classmates without leaving their homes. This convenience is further enhanced by the accessibility of advanced technology and resources, hence removing the necessity of being physically close to educational institutions. The availability of the camera toggle feature in online classrooms enables students to customise their learning experience according to their personal preference.

> It is, and if it is, everything is very easy. We have all the information, we have everything in our hands. Interview participant 33, female, 24-year-old.

2.3. Enhanced Time and Cost Efficiency. From the students' standpoint, online classes mostly revolve on the efficient utilisation of time and financial resources. They like the convenience of remote learning, which eliminates the need to commute to a physical campus and allows them to establish their own study timetables. It is not just about circumventing traffic and rail fees; it also encompasses little conveniences such as not needing to purchase food during breaks in physical sessions.

> I can manage my time much better. FGD participant 30, female, 44-year-old.

> So we don't need to go to Costa to have a coffee. We always spend money on campus and then when we are home, we are home. You don't need to buy nothing. Interview participant 44, female, 25-year-old.

The cost-effectiveness is particularly important for individuals with limited financial resources. Additionally, the absence of a daily drive and the opportunity to establish a pleasant study atmosphere at home contribute to a more relaxed experience. Students have a greater sense of calmness, which enhances their ability to focus and improves their general state of health.

> I work nightshift sometime. I have about 2 hr to sleep before I start the class. So in fact, to me online, it's good for me, it's good for me if you take them. That's why I said I prefer to and online. I have a little bit time to sort of things in myself. Interview participant 47, male, 54-year-old.

2.4. Technological Proficiency. Online programmes improve students' comprehension of technology as they engage with diverse digital tools and platforms. These talents are advantageous not just in academic endeavours but also in the professional realm. Online programmes are well-suited to the changing educational environment and provide a great opportunity for students to improve their computing and technology abilities. The digital resources offered in online

learning platforms offer a high degree of ease and effectiveness that helps the process of acquiring knowledge.

> I know I'm not good in computer, but when I start with this online it helped me a lot. Help me a lot. Because these practices make a man perfect when you start using it now, I am starting to catch up. I really, really enjoy it because of the learning the computer. Interview participant 47, male, 54-year-old.

Online classes provide a range of advantages, including their versatility, ease of access, and convenience for students. Online classrooms not only synchronise education with other life responsibilities but also cultivate a more inclusive and technologically sophisticated educational environment.

3. Disadvantages of Online Classes

Although online classes provide several benefits, it is crucial to recognise the significant drawbacks that students face. These problems can impact several facets of the online learning experience. Based on our conversations with students, we have identified certain difficulties they have in relation to online learning.

3.1. Experiencing Social Isolation. Numerous students described sentiments of seclusion inside the digital learning environment. They experience a lack of physical engagement with their peers and instructors, resulting in feelings of alone, unease, and despondency. Students observed that online programmes provide a reduced level of interpersonal connection compared to regular classrooms. They fail to seize the chances for informal dialogues, cooperative teamwork, and impromptu exchanges with teachers that enhance the educational experience. Students expressed that online learning might restrict their involvement in extracurricular activities or collaborative projects that need face-to-face connection. They see that the absence of physical presence diminishes the profundity and complexity of these encounters, hence influencing their holistic personal and professional growth.

> I don't think everything should be done online. Some people would stop talking to other people, which could be bad for your mental health. They wouldn't know anyone, and they might not want to go out. I'd rather have a mix of the two. FGD participant 29, female, 33-year-old.

> It's the missing body language; I can't see I can't remember. Interview participant 33, female, 21-year-old.

Students lamented the absence of the nuanced non-verbal cues that are inherent in in-person encounters. The absence of nonverbal clues such as body language and facial expressions can result in misinterpretations and impede the effectiveness of communication and comprehension. In addition, students who are not native English speakers expressed their difficulties in online classrooms due to linguistic obstacles. They struggle to comprehend intricate academic topics and engage meaningfully in debates.

3.2. Mental Health Challenges in Online Learning. The virtual learning setting, although adaptable, induced feelings of isolation, and the absence of face-to-face engagement with classmates and educators had a negative impact on students' psychological well-being. Lack of in-person communication, interpersonal connections, and a feeling of belonging resulted in emotions of alone, unease, and even depressive states. Students experienced a lack of support and camaraderie in non-traditional classes, which had a negative influence on their general well-being.

> I felt alone and stressed when I was learning online. When you're by yourself, it's hard to keep going. Interview participant 34, female, 24-year-old.

3.3. Technical Issues. Students commonly had technical difficulties when attending online classes. The issues varied from microphone malfunctions to subpar audio quality, frequently causing disruptions in the class dynamics and resulting in misunderstandings, particularly among students with different linguistic backgrounds. The lack of equitable access to dependable and fast Internet is a substantial concern for several pupils. According to their analysis, frequent connectivity troubles frequently interrupt sessions and result in missed learning opportunities. Moreover, the process of travelling across many Internet platforms and applications might be perplexing. A multitude of students voiced their opinion that the shift to online learning necessitated a substantial adaptation. The individuals experienced significant stress and frustration when attempting to acquire proficiency in unfamiliar applications and navigate via virtual surroundings.

> The problem is hearing others. I don't know if others can hear me, but. FGD participant 26, female, 33-year-old.

3.4. Distractions at Home. Home environment distractions provide a prevalent obstacle for students, requiring them to navigate and manage any disruptions while studying. They struggle to maintain focus on their academic pursuits due to the disruptive nature of domestic sounds, the constant presence of family members, and the various home activities that demand their attention.

> Yes, because we have the family in the back, sometimes children, husbands, sometime neighbours knocking the door disturbing us. Interview participant 04, male, 47-year-old.

These student experiences highlight the complex and diverse difficulties of online learning. Although online classes provide flexibility and convenience, it is evident that these concerns must be resolved to guarantee students' access to

high-quality education without sacrificing their mental well-being and overall learning experiences.

3.5. *Digital Divide.* The digital divide was brought to attention by certain pupils, who emphasised the inequalities it generates. Some students lack access to essential resources required for efficient online learning, such as gadgets, dependable Internet, or a suitable learning environment. In addition, they highlighted the financial strain associated with maintaining a reliable Wi-Fi connection and acquiring essential equipment.

> *I quit school a long time ago, in 1988, to be honest. Going back to school is a big change for me, and I'm having trouble with this technology.* Interview participant 15, male, 52-year-old.

4. Future Outlook for Online Learning

The future of education is determined by the convergence of several learning modes, each tailored to the varied tastes and requirements of students. Insights derived from student choices and experiences reveal that the field of education is undergoing significant changes, providing many opportunities for learning. Several crucial factors to consider for the future implementation of online learning include the following.

4.1. *Preferential Inclination Towards in-Person Learning.* A significant majority of students, namely, 26 out of 49, have clearly indicated a strong preference for the conventional method of face-to-face learning. They highly like the concrete, engaging, and interactive educational experience it offers. They like the direct contact with teachers and classmates, which promotes more profound involvement and cooperative learning.

> *We need to think ourselves not through the Internet. I think face-to-face is better because interaction is different.* Interview participant 40, female, 36-year-old.

4.2. *Online Learning Preference.* Conversely, while some students preferred traditional learning methods, a distinct group expressed a clear preference for online learning environments. They like the convenience and adaptability it provides, enabling them to access instructional material from any location and organise their study based on their own timetables.

> *I think this is the future. Yes, like technology, this is new technology I to be honest.* Interview participant 36, female, 26-year-old.

4.3. *Blended Learning Preference.* Nevertheless, a substantial majority of students (40 out of 49) indicated a preference for blended learning. This strategy integrates components of both online and in-person training, accommodating various learning styles. Students are attracted to it because it achieves a harmonious combination of the adaptability of online education and the depth of in-person interactions.

> *So to me, I'll choose both the way the balance is OK for me. One class face-to-face, one online, is whenever I have to have to go to class, I will go.* Interview participant 5, female, 44-year-old.

With the increasing popularity of blended learning, students have emphasised the significance of including flexibility into this educational approach. They value flexible scheduling, a diverse range of learning tools, and the chance to select their preferred learning paths. They consider these components to be crucial for the achievement of successful blended learning. Students emphasised the importance of being able to customise the combination of online and in-person components to align with their personal tastes and requirements. They advocated for universities to prioritise the provision of flexible scheduling, easily accessible materials, and the autonomy to select their preferred learning paths within the blended learning framework. Students perceive this flexibility as crucial in fostering a satisfying and efficient mixed learning experience.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the experience of students about the online learning as many higher education providers in the UK have seen a significant shift in education, transitioning from incorporating online elements into traditional classroom teaching (such as blended or flipped learning) to completely adopting online courses with diverse communication methods. Despite the growing familiarity with online learning, educators and students frequently encounter a lack of readiness, especially in times of public health emergencies [16]. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a thorough investigation of online learning methodologies, namely, in the realm of public health and social care education in the UK. The advantages and drawbacks identified in our study align with a wider discussion in the existing literature, emphasising the necessity for a more discerning evaluation of the prospects of online education. The benefits of online learning, such as the capacity to effectively manage academic endeavours with professional, personal, and caregiving obligations, have been extensively established long ago [17]. This benefit is especially noteworthy in the context of the pandemic, as individuals had unparalleled difficulties in upholding their education while managing the intricacies of remote employment, family obligations, and caring. Online learning afforded them the freedom to adjust to these novel and challenging conditions. In addition, online access to educational materials has eradicated geographical limitations, facilitating the participation of students from diverse locations in the learning process. This aligns with the principle of lifelong learning, which serves individuals who choose to gain information at different points in their lives and enables them to pursue education regardless of their location.

Online learning offers significant advantages in terms of increased efficiency and the acquisition of advanced technology skills [18, 19]. In a society propelled by technological progress, the skill to traverse digital platforms and interact with online material is growing in significance. Online education provides students with the necessary skills for a rapidly changing employment market [20]. The adaptability and effectiveness provided by online courses also align with the requirements of a rapidly evolving, interconnected society. Students may enhance their time management skills and minimise the expenses associated with traditional in-person programmes, which typically include transportation and may incur additional costs [21]. These benefits are in line with wider educational trends that prioritise efficiency and cost-efficiency.

However, the disadvantages of online learning align with the conclusions of prior research. The issue of social isolation has been widely acknowledged as a major obstacle in the realm of online education [22]. The lack of physical classrooms and face-to-face interactions might result in a feeling of detachment and solitude among pupils [23]. The absence of direct interpersonal interaction with classmates and teachers impedes the development of social connections and cooperative learning, both of which are essential components of the educational process. These findings highlight the need of addressing the social and emotional dimensions of online education. Furthermore, our investigation unveiled the psychological difficulties that students have in the online educational setting. The predominant use of writing as the main method of communication fostered profound contemplation, although it also presented difficulties for pupils without proficient writing abilities, resulting in brief replies and possibly sentiments of coercion to engage. The asynchronous aspect of online learning, allowing students to study at their own time, resulted in communication delays, especially during peer exchanges. The lack of immediate feedback and restricted chances for real-time interaction can have an impact on students' happiness and learning results, particularly when rapid input is highly appreciated.

Technical challenges and the disparity in access to digital resources have become significant barriers in the realm of online education [23]. In order to guarantee fair and equal access to education, institutions must actively address these concerns. The digital gap, defined by the limited access to essential technology and Internet connectivity among pupils from underprivileged backgrounds, intensifies educational disparities. Moreover, the many disruptions seen in the home setting might impede students' ability to concentrate and maintain attention, highlighting the importance of implementing techniques that establish favourable conditions for online learning. The intricacy of student preferences in the digital era is shown by our findings. They corroborate previous studies suggesting that a substantial proportion of students highly regard the conventional face-to-face classroom experience [24]. Nevertheless, the inclination towards mixed learning arises as a crucial factor to take into account. This desire is backed by the increasing amount of evidence that highlights the efficacy of mixed methods [25, 26].

Blended learning combines the advantages of conventional in-person teaching and online learning, providing a versatile and individualised method that accommodates the different requirements of students. It is crucial to acknowledge that the changing nature of education requires flexible and inclusive teaching approaches that accommodate the varied needs and preferences of students. The study emphasises the need to balance the benefits of online learning with the challenges it presents. While it offers flexibility and accessibility, it also raises concerns about loneliness and mental health issues [27]. To ensure fair access, technical challenges must be addressed, and the digital gap bridged. The integration of online components with traditional approaches in educational institutions is crucial. The experiences of students using online learning demonstrate a range of both favourable and unfavourable results. Although written communication promotes profound reflection, it can pose difficulties for pupils with limited writing skills. The flexibility to work remotely and at any given moment may lead to potential delays in responding, particularly in situations that need immediate and live contact. Online learning necessitates heightened self-regulation, motivation, and discipline from the student. In order to attain success, students must employ self-regulated learning strategies such as visualisation, note-taking, knowledge retrieval, and focused attention. The project seeks to ascertain the feasibility of employing these strategies for emergency instruction during a pandemic.

Nonetheless, higher education institutions are experiencing an influx of mature students, individuals aged 21 or over who did not immediately pursue a degree after school [28–31]. Our findings highlight a substantial number of adult learners with family commitments in this course, outnumbering single adolescent learners. These students, often with past careers or family responsibilities, bring a diverse range of experiences. Some have navigated non-traditional educational paths and have made significant efforts to gain university entry qualifications later in life. Despite their motivation, they face unique challenges such as financial constraints, external duties, time management issues, academic anxiety, and social integration concerns. In line with prior research, our study underscores the influence of students' demographic backgrounds on their preferred mode of course delivery [30, 32, 33]. Further research is needed to support these findings and understand the typical demographics of attendees in this course.

6. Research Impacts

6.1. The Future of Online Learning. Emergency remote teaching is the use of Internet teaching resources to provide training in reaction to an unexpected catastrophe, like the COVID-19 pandemic [34]. On the other hand, online learning refers to the intentional creation and provision of educational instruction inside a digital educational setting. The current study underscores the increasing importance of digital learning in higher education, propelled by causes such as improved technological accessibility, a growing need for flexible learning, and the imperative to prepare students for a

digitalised work world [35]. This study explores the experiences of students during the COVID-19 pandemic and various learning methods, providing valuable insights for shaping future educational offerings. It suggests that digital learning should be designed with a focus on engagement and effectiveness and that ample training and assistance should be provided to both educators and learners. The ultimate goal is to promote fair and inclusive educational methods that transcend geographical limitations and provide global support for educators and students. The future of online learning in public health and social care education is promising, as advancements in technology, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, will result in more tailored and flexible experiences [36]. Institutions must consider these preferences and emerging trends when adapting their educational models to provide a complete and efficient education that meets the demands of a dynamic and ever-changing educational landscape. This will enable educators to identify areas for improvement and tailor teaching strategies accordingly.

6.2. Evaluation of Current Online Learning Strategies. Assessing the effectiveness of current online learning methods in public health and social care education is essential in order to find areas for improvement. Evaluating the effectiveness of current online learning systems in public health and social care education is essential for assessing their efficiency, identifying areas for improvement, and ensuring that students are receiving a high-quality education. The assessment may entail gathering input from students and instructors, examining student performance metrics, and evaluating the overall efficacy of online learning platforms and resources [37, 38]. Moreover, it is essential to consider the alignment between online learning approaches and the learning objectives and outcomes of public health and social care education. This assessment should also encompass the accessibility and inclusivity of online learning procedures, ensuring that they effectively cater to the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities or unique learning requirements. Furthermore, it is important to consider the potential to expand and maintain online learning methods in the field of public health and social care education. This encompasses the assessment of the technological framework necessary to provide online education, together with the allocation of resources and provision of training to enable teachers to proficiently offer online courses [30].

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the investigation of online learning within the realm of public health and social care education in the UK has uncovered a multifaceted environment characterised by both benefits and obstacles. Adapting public health and social care education to the digital era is crucial to meet the evolving needs of students and effectively equip them for future employment in a rapidly growing healthcare industry. Online learning approaches provide several advantages, such as flexibility, accessibility, and the incorporation of interactive and engaging elements. By using digital platforms and technology, these methods may enhance student involvement, facilitate interactive learning experiences, and foster lifelong learning and professional development. Nevertheless, it also raises apprehensions over social seclusion, psychological well-being, technological difficulties, and the disparity in access to digital resources. The current study revealed that although most students still choose traditional in-person instruction, a minority stated a preference for remote learning, while a substantial majority indicated a preference for a combination of both in-person and online instruction, known as blended learning. This implies that adopting a hybrid method that integrates both formats might be the most efficient way to proceed. It is crucial to thoroughly assess student viewpoints and make an effort to be inclusive in order to maintain the effectiveness and relevance of public health and social care education in the digital era.

Data Availability

The qualitative data used to support the findings of this study are included within the article.

Additional Points

Strengths and Limitations. This study is favourable since the researchers, who are also lecturers, have access to a community of students for research reasons. The existence of this unique relationship yielded crucial insights that may have been difficult to acquire from other research participants. The study utilised a qualitative methodology, enabling thorough investigation of the relevant topics. This qualitative approach enabled a comprehensive and subtle comprehension of students' experiences and viewpoints. Moreover, the research exhibited a firm dedication to ethical principles, employing rigorous techniques to minimise any power imbalances linked to the instructor–student dynamic. The methods encompassed highlighting the voluntary aspect of involvement, employing transparent informed consent processes, and prioritising secrecy and anonymity to safeguard participants' privacy. Although this study provides useful insights, its conclusions are limited by some constraints. The participants were recruited from a single British higher education institution, which might restrict the applicability of the findings to other institutions or educational settings. The study's geographical scope, which centres on a particular British institution, may not comprehensively encompass the diversity of student experiences across other locations or nations. Furthermore, the lack of comparable data from other institutions or situations restricts the capacity to compare and authenticate the distinctiveness of the findings. Finally, it is important to admit that as both the researcher and a lecturer, there may have been some subjectivity or potential bias that may have impacted the interpretation of the data or the formulation of research questions. In addition, although there are strict ethical measures in place, the possibility of social desirability bias still poses a constraint. Students may have felt obliged to produce replies that were socially desirable owing to their connection with the researcher in their role as a lecturer, which might have influenced the accuracy and thoroughness of their answers.

Conflicts of Interest

Acknowledgments

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