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AN INVESTIGATION ON ONLINE COMPONENTS OF THE BACHELOR OF EDUCATION HONOURS IN SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION DEGREE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

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Abstract:
The Department of Special Needs Education, part of the Faculty of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), offers the Bachelor of Education Honours in Special Needs Education degree. This program differs from other bachelor's degree programs as most activities are conducted online. The study aims to identify the current situation, explore the challenges faced by students and lecturers, and propose improvements for online activities in the program. The study follows a pragmatic philosophical worldview and employs a mixed-methods research approach with a convergent design. Data was collected through questionnaires (49 students and 8 lecturers), interview schedules (10 students and 4 lecturers), and document analysis. The program spans four years and requires 120 credits, with assessments consisting of continuous assessment (CA) and a final examination. Findings indicate that most students were satisfied with their technical knowledge and used mobile phones for online activities. However, many students faced difficulties with slow internet connections, unclear audio, and device malfunctions. While 58% of students were satisfied with their online activities, 12% expressed dissatisfaction. A significant number of lecturers (87.5%) preferred face-to-face teaching. Lecturers (75%) reported three major issues: equipment problems, lack of student responses, and internet-related difficulties. Students suggested providing clearer instructions for online activities, while lecturers recommended offering flexible solutions for online assignment submission and grading. Additionally, the researcher proposes the creation of a convenient communication channel, especially for students' grievances, to promptly resolve any issues related to online activities.

Keywords: online components; the bachelor of education honours in special needs education degree

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1. Introduction

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) was established in 1980 under the University Act No. 16 of 1978 and OUSL Ordinance No. 1 of 1990, as amended. The OUSL consists of six faculties: the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Engineering Technology, the Faculty of Health Sciences, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and the Faculty of Management Studies. As well, the OUSL has the same legal and academic status as any other national university in the Sri Lankan higher education system.

The Faculty of Education consists of four departments (Early Childhood and Primary Education, Secondary & Tertiary Education, Special Needs Education, Educational Leadership and Management) and offers a variety of programmes from certificate level to postgraduate (PhD) levels. All these departments offer bachelor's degree programmes related to different disciplines, for example, drama and theatre, natural sciences, special needs education, etc. All these programmes are offered in open and distance modes. Normally, the Faculty of Education conducts its Day Schools and activity-based assignments on-site for the bachelor's degree. The Department of Special Needs Education offers the Degree of Bachelor of Education Honours in Special Needs Education (B.Ed. Hon. in SNE) programme differs from the other bachelor's degree programme because most of the activities are conducted online. Before the COVID pandemic, this programme was also conducted like other bachelor's degree programmes. So, it is important to find out how these online course delivery methods affect the students in the Bachelor of Education Honours in Special Needs Education programme.

2. Literature Review

Online learning is conquering the modern education system. Successful online learning requires a reconstruction of the roles, responsibilities, and practices of online instructors and their online students (Vonderwell and Savery, 2004). So, it is clear that to make online learning successful, instructors and students both should play a significant role.

Online courses are educational programs delivered primarily via digital platforms, enabling students to engage in learning activities remotely. These courses have become increasingly essential in higher education, offering various formats such as fully online courses, which deliver all instructional content digitally, and blended or hybrid courses, which combine online and face-to-face components (Allen & Seaman, 2017). In the context of special needs education, online courses provide a flexible and accessible mode of learning that can accommodate diverse learning needs and preferences, enhancing the overall inclusivity of educational programs (Means *et al.*, 2014). The integration of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs) further diversifies the online learning landscape, allowing educators to implement various methods to effectively suit the needs of students with special needs (Anderson, 2019). Given the unique challenges in special needs education, leveraging

these online components can potentially improve engagement and learning outcomes (Hodges *et al.*, 2020).

Online learning is becoming popular among students. Runnels (2006) explained that online instruction is welcomed by students as it provides them with convenience and autonomy. Ibáñez and Scott (2007) mentioned that online courses can provide a dynamic learning environment for the students. Bartley & Golek (2004) highlighted several benefits that can be gained by online activities, such as the fact that an expert can address a class from any location and provide real-time responses, providing a more compelling learning experience than reading an expert's writings.

Online learning also promotes inclusivity and accessibility. By removing geographical barriers, enables students from diverse locations to access high-quality education and interact with instructors and peers worldwide (UptoSkills, 2023). This accessibility is particularly beneficial for students who might face limitations due to distance, mobility issues, or time constraints. Moreover, online platforms offer personalized learning experiences tailored to individual needs, leveraging adaptive technologies to support student progress effectively (Harvard Business Publishing, 2023). Another significant advantage is the opportunity for self-directed learning, where students take ownership of their education, setting personal goals and tracking their development autonomously (UptoSkills, 2023).

While online instruction is gaining popularity, it is not free from criticisms posed by traditional print-based faculty (Appanna, 2008). There are several concerns about online teaching and learning. These concerns include the changing nature of technology, the complexity of networked systems, the lack of stability in online learning environments, and the limited understanding of how much students and instructors need to know to successfully participate using communication and information technology (Brandt, 1996).

There are several challenges that can be recognized as obstacles to its success. One of the main challenges is the lack of direct interaction, which can result in feelings of isolation for students and hinder the development of a sense of community in the course (Hiltz, 1994; Rovai, 2002). Additionally, many students face difficulties with time management, as online courses often require greater self-discipline and motivation compared to traditional in-person classes (Rosenberg, 2001; Artino, 2007). Another issue is the potential for technological difficulties, including unreliable internet connections and inadequate technical support, which can disrupt learning and lead to frustration (Bates, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, some students may struggle with the complexity of the digital tools and platforms used in online courses, which can lead to a steep learning curve and hinder their overall learning experience (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

So, online learning has pros and cons. It is important to recognize the deficiencies of online learning and work to minimize or eliminate them to provide good online learning.

3. Material and Methods

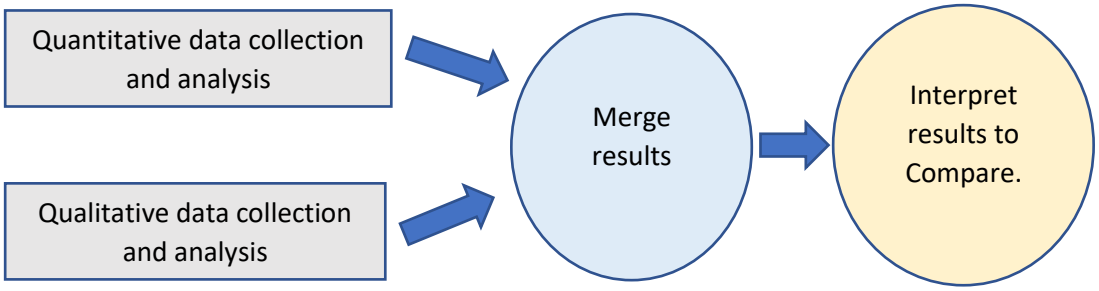
This chapter outlines the research methods and procedures used to conduct the study. It begins with an explanation of the research approach and design, followed by a description of the sample selection and participants. The methods of data collection and the development of instruments are detailed, including the tools used for gathering relevant information. Additionally, the chapter discusses the data analysis techniques employed to interpret the results. Finally, the ethical considerations guiding the research process, including participating in human rights and confidentiality, are addressed to ensure the integrity and ethical standards of the study.

3.1 Research Approach and Design

Mixed Methods: Mixed methods systematically integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches to research in order to answer research questions (Tashakkori and Newman, 2023). In addition to this, the present study incorporated a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively address the research objectives by integrating numerical data with qualitative insights. Pragmatism is the worldview of this research, focusing on practical solutions and combining different methods to address the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

The research design of this study is a convergent design, specifically a one-phase design, in which qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously. The data are then analyzed separately, followed by merging the results and interpreting them to compare and draw meaningful conclusions. The following Figure 1 clearly illustrates the convergent design and the steps involved in collecting, analyzing, merging, and interpreting both qualitative and quantitative data.

Figure 1: Convergent Design (One-Phase Design)



Note: Creswell, J., & Creswell, D. (2018)

3.2 Samples of the Study

A sample refers to a selected group of individuals from a larger population chosen to represent the population's characteristics in a research study (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the sample consists of individuals who meet specific criteria related to the research objectives.

The students' questionnaire (structured): Students of the B.Ed. Hon. in SNE programme: A questionnaire (a Google Form) is distributed among all students of level 6 (only 49 students responded), except level 3, 4, and 5 (we excluded level 3 and 4 because these levels are considered diploma-level courses offered by any faculty or department of the Open University of Sri Lanka or the National Diploma in Teaching (Special Education) of NCOE, and level 5 students do not have enough experience to answer the questions given in the questionnaire). The questionnaire was distributed only among the level 6 students.

The students' interview schedule (semi-structured) was given to ten (10) students of the B.Ed. Hon. in SNE program: random sampling method (they were selected from the above 49 students (Table 1) who had mentioned their contact numbers)

The academics' questionnaire (structured): 13 academics are involved with the B.Ed. Hon. in SNE programme. The questionnaire was distributed among all the academics (13) who are involved with the programme even though it received only 08 responses from the academics.

The academics' interview schedule (semi-structured): randomly selected four (4) academics from the responded academics.

Table 1: Distribution of Data Collection Instruments and Responses

Instruments	Questionnaires		Interview schedules
	Distributed	Responded	Responded
Students (Level - 6)	110	49	10
Lecturers	13	08	04

3.3 Methods of Data Collection and Instrument Development

- **Survey method (Quantitative)**
  - A questionnaire for students, structured in a Google Form, was distributed to all students in level 6 using the census sampling method via WhatsApp, and the data was collected into a spreadsheet.
  - A questionnaire, structured in a Google Form, was distributed via social media (WhatsApp) to all 13 academics involved in the program using the census sampling method, and the data was collected into a spreadsheet.
- **Interview (Qualitative)**
  - interview schedule (semi-structured): The students' interviews (randomly selected 10 students) were conducted over the phone.
  - interview schedule (semi-structured): The academics' interviews (randomly selected 4 academics) were conducted physically (face-to-face).
- **Document analysis (Qualitative)**
  - Relevant documents from the B.Ed. Hon. in Special Needs Education Degree programme were analyzed.

3.4 Data Analysis

- Quantitative data analysis: collected data through questionnaires will be coded and converted into frequencies, and frequencies will be converted into percentages and presented in tables and graphs (Descriptive statistics)

- Qualitative data analysis: The data collected from semi-structured interviews and document analysis will be presented as a description (descriptive data analysis).

3.5 Ethical Consideration

Ethics can be defined as a method, procedure, or perspective for deciding how to act and for analyzing complex problems and issues. There are five important reasons why research should adhere to ethical norms; the first, norms promote the aims of the research (knowledge, truth, and avoiding error – to avoid fabricating, etc.), the second, the values that are essential to collaborative work (accountability, mutual respect, etc. - copyright and patenting policies, data sharing policies, etc.), the third, accountable to the public (conflicts of interest, the human subjects protections, etc.), the fourth, public support **(**public will help if they can trust the quality and integrity of research), the fifth, moral and social values (such as social responsibility, human rights, etc**.**) (Resnik, D., 2020).

So, the present study will not present falsified or fabricated data. Always respect copyright policy and intellectual properties. Furthermore, the present study is accountable for social responsibility, human rights, and compliance with the law. All the data will be kept confidential and safe, and this data may not be used for purposes other than the present research study.

4. Results and Discussion

Data analysis is presented according to the sequential order of the objectives of the study.

4.1 The Current Situation of the Degree Program

The first objective is to identify the current situation of the B.Ed. Hon. in SNE programme. Conducting the degree in Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education programme since 2013, it was restructured in 2021 in line with the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF) and changed the name of the programme to the Bachelor of Education Honours in Special Needs Education Degree Programme.

The aim of the programme is to develop competent graduates with broad knowledge, skill and favorable attitudes to provide quality care in every aspect of teaching practice. It is designed to contribute to the development of graduates who demonstrate a sense of commitment, social responsibility, and sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of others.

This is a four-year programme with 120 credits. degree programme commenced with level 3. Level 3 and Level 4: Diploma-level courses offered by any

faculty/department of the Open University of Sri Lanka or National Diploma in Teaching (Special Education) of NCOE. Level 5 and Level 6: Courses are offered by the Department of Special Needs Education. This program is offered in all three media: Sinhala, Tamil, and English.

Assessment and evaluation mainly consist of two components, namely continuous assessment (CA) and final examination. The content and nature of each component at levels 5 and 6 are as follows.

Table 2: The Content and Nature of Each Component at Level 5

Course Code	Course Title	Credit Rating
SNU5535	Psychology for Special Needs Education	5
SNU5336	Philosophical Foundations of Special Needs Education	3
SNU5237	Sociological Foundations of Special Needs Education	2
SNU5338	Introduction to Exceptionalities and Learning Needs	3
SNU5239	Emerging Trends in Special Needs Education	2
SNU5540	Comparative Education and Educational Problems in Special Needs Education.	5
SNU5341	Educational Guidance and Counseling in Special Needs Education	3
SNU5242	Inclusive Education	2
SNU5343	Measurement and Evaluation in Special Needs Education	3
SNU5244	Curriculum Theory and Practice in Special Needs Education	2
Total Credits		**30**

This degree program conducted Day Schools and continuous assessment (CA) in physical classrooms (face-to- face), but with the COVID-19 pandemic, all Day Schools and CA were changed to online. Currently, this program is conducted in hybrid mode, but most of the courses are conducted online (the measurement and evaluation in special needs education courses are conducted in a physical classroom).

Table 3: The Content and Nature of Each Component at Level 6

New Course Codes	Course	Credit Rating
SNU6620	Educational Technology for Special Needs Education	6
SNU6221	Inclusive Primary Education	2
SNU6822	Project	8
SNU6223	Child Rights of Children with Special Educational Needs	2
SNU6224	Classroom Management in Special Needs Education	2
SNU6225	Rehabilitation and Community-Based Rehabilitation	2
SNU6826	Teaching Practice in Special Needs Education	8
Total Credits		**30**

4.2 Challenges Faced by Students

When focusing on the second objective of the study (to inquire about challenges faced by students of the B.Ed. Hon. in SNE programme), the hindering factors in relation to the students' online activities were found out by the online questionnaire (quantitative data) and interviews over the phone (qualitative data).

The following Table 4 and Table 5 explain the students' basic information in relation to their age groups and working experiences.

Table 4: Students' Age Groups

Age	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
26-30	23	47%	47
31-35	09	19%	66
36-40	07	14%	80
41-45	04	08%	88
46 & above	06	12%	100

According to Table 4, most of the students belong to the 26-30 years old category (47%), followed by the 31-35 years old age group (19%). Eighty percent (80%) of the students are under the age of 36, while only 20% are above 40 years of age. Therefore, the student sample mostly consists of younger students.

Table 5: Students' Working Experiences

Duration (Years)	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
5 and less than 5	24	58%	58
6-10	08	19%	77
11-15	04	09%	86
16-20	00	00%	86
21 and above 21	06	14%	100

Table 5 explains the students' work experience (by years). There were only forty-two respondents. The majority of the students (58%) have less than 6 years of working experience. Eighty-six (86%) percent of the students have less than 16 years of experience. The remaining 14% of the students have 21 years or above working experience. So, the majority of the students (58%) do not have much work experience (less than 6 years).

Table 6: Availability of an Appropriate Place at Home to Engage with Online Activity

The satisfaction level of the place	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Very good	14	29%	29
Good	23	47%	76
Moderate	10	20%	96
Poor	02	04%	100
Very poor	00	00%	100

Table 6 shows whether the students have an appropriate place at their home to engage in online activities without much difficulty. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the students say they have a good place to engage in online learning. ninety-six percent (96%) of the students are at least moderately satisfied with the place where they have to engage in online activities. The remaining 4% of the students are extremely dissatisfied with the place that they have at home to engage in online activities. As a whole, students have an appropriate place at home to engage in online learning activities. Nicola Galadi and

others have also emphasized the significant role the home environment plays in online learning, indicating that a conducive setting is essential for successful engagement in online activities (Galadi, 2020).

Table 7: Students' Satisfaction with Their Technological Knowledge

The satisfaction level of the place	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Totally satisfied	16	33%	33
Satisfied	27	55%	88
Moderate	06	12%	100
Dissatisfied	00	00%	100
Totally dissatisfied	00	00%	100

Table 7 shows the levels of students' satisfaction with their technological knowledge. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the respondents report being totally satisfied with their technical knowledge. Additionally, 88% of the respondents are at least satisfied with their technical knowledge. No respondents reported being dissatisfied or totally unsatisfied with their technical knowledge. All respondents are at least moderately satisfied with their technical knowledge. Therefore, it can be concluded that all respondents can manage their online activities reasonably well, as they have at least a moderate level of technical knowledge. Bosath (2020) also mentioned that skills such as navigating online platforms, troubleshooting technical issues, and selecting appropriate tools are essential for successful online learning. These findings align with the current study, emphasizing the importance of technological competence for fostering effective online education.

Table 8: Instruments Used by Students for Their Online Activities

Instrument	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Mobile Phone	18	56%	56
Laptop	12	38%	94
Desktop	02	06%	100

According to Table 8, students use three types of instruments to engage in online activities, namely: mobile phones, laptops, and desktops. The majority of the respondents (56%) use mobile phones for their online activities, followed by laptops (38%). Only 6% of the respondents use desktop computers. So, all students have the necessary instruments to engage with their online activities. Hossain and Ahmed (2016) support the current research, showing that sixty-two percent of students in their study relied on smartphones for academic purposes like accessing information and completing tasks. Conversely, the Pearson Student Mobile Device Survey (2015) offers a contrast, highlighting that laptops were more integral for specific academic activities despite the widespread use of smartphones.

Table 9: Different Modes Used by Students to Access the Internet

Mode\s	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Mobile Data	22	45%	45
Home Wi-Fi	15	31%	76
Mobile data and home Wi-Fi	12	24%	100

Table 9 shows the different modes students use to access the internet. A majority of students (56%) have mobile phones with internet access. Most students (45%) use mobile data, followed by 31% who use home Wi-Fi. More importantly, 24% of students use both mobile data and home Wi-Fi. Overall, the data reveals that mobile phones with internet access are the most common method for students to connect to the internet, with a significant portion of students relying on mobile data. The combination of mobile data and home Wi-Fi usage further indicates that students have diverse access methods to support their online activities, suggesting the importance of both mobile and home internet access in their daily academic tasks.

Studies consistently highlight the reliance on mobile data for internet access among students. For instance, a study by Song *et al.* (2021) found that 63% of students in their survey primarily used mobile data to access online learning platforms, supporting the current research findings. In contrast, research by Mtebe and Raisamo (2014) noted that a significant number of students in urban areas preferred institutional Wi-Fi, indicating less dependence on mobile data. These findings suggest varied preferences based on available resources and infrastructure.

Table 10: Difficulties Faced by the Students During the Day Schools

Difficulties	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Power failure	11	24%	24
Slower Internet	26	56%	80
Loss of connection	09	20%	100

Table 10 shows that most students (56%) face difficulties due to slow internet connections, followed by power failures (24%) and loss of connection. Additionally, 76% of the students reported experiencing difficulties with internet connectivity during Day School sessions. This indicates that technical issues, such as slow internet and power failures, significantly impact students' ability to engage with online content during their Day School sessions, highlighting the need for improved infrastructure and support.

Table 11: Weaknesses of the Devices

Difficulties	Number of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
The sound is not clear	21	47%	47
Devices are stuck frequently.	12	27%	27
The screen is not clear (blur)	06	13%	87
The screen is not functioning properly	01	02%	89
Overheating	05	11%	100

Table 11 focuses on the weaknesses of the devices used by the students. The majority of the students (47%) mentioned in relation to their devices that sound is not clear. Also, students (27%) mention their devices stuck frequently. In addition to that, 13% of the responding students say the screen of the device (mobile or laptop, etc.) is not clear or blurred. Some students (11%) mention overheating problems in relation to their devices.

Unclear audio and video quality are frequently noted as barriers in mobile learning, with students often expressing frustration when technical issues interfere with their learning experience (Choudhary *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, the issue of devices freezing or malfunctioning during learning sessions is well-documented, particularly when students use lower-quality devices or face network instability (Liu *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, unclear screens can significantly reduce the effectiveness of online courses, a challenge that is exacerbated by the small screen size of mobile devices and poor resolution, which are commonly faced in developing regions (Alqahtani *et al.*, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of addressing technical limitations in mobile learning, as they can hinder the educational experience and diminish student satisfaction.

Table 12: Difficulties Experienced by Students during Online Activity-based Day School (ABDS)

Difficulties	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Availability of an appropriate place to engage with ABDS.	04	14%	14
Face difficulties when submitting activity report	10	36%	50
Could not ask questions from the lecturer without hesitation	04	14%	64
Low clarity of the instructions given at the beginning of ABDS	07	25%	89
No sufficient skills to engage with online ABDS	02	7%	96
Could not clearly understand the things explained by the lecturer	01	4%	100

Table 12 highlights the difficulties faced by students during their online activity-based DaySchool (ABDS). Most students (36%) reported difficulties when submitting activity reports, followed by 25% who mentioned the low clarity of instructions provided at the beginning of the ABDS. Additionally, 14% of students felt hesitant to ask questions from the lecturer, and only 14% of students had an appropriate space to engage with ABDS. On the other hand, 86% of students lacked an appropriate place to engage with ABDS. Furthermore, 7% of students reported not having sufficient skills to effectively engage with online ABDS. These findings suggest that communication barriers, unclear instructions, inadequate learning environments, and a lack of necessary skills are significant obstacles for students, impacting their ability to fully engage with the online

activities. Addressing these issues could enhance the overall effectiveness of ABDS and improve student satisfaction

Table 13: Students' Overall Satisfaction with the Online Activities

Levels of satisfaction	No. of students	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Totally satisfied	17	35%	35
Satisfied	11	23%	58
Moderate	09	18%	76
Dissatisfied	5	10%	86
Totally dissatisfied	6	12%	98
Not responded	1	02%	100

Table 13 highlights students' overall satisfaction with online activities. The majority of the students, 35%, report being totally satisfied with the online activities, while 76% express at least moderate satisfaction with the program's online offerings. However, 10% of students are dissatisfied, and 12% are completely dissatisfied with the overall online activities. These findings indicate that while a significant portion of students are satisfied, there is a smaller group who feel dissatisfied with the current online activities.

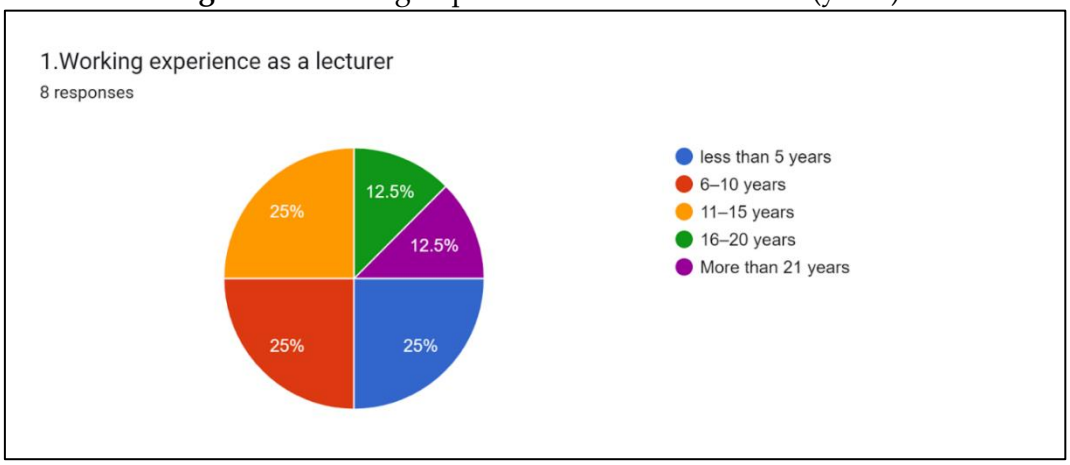
A study by Smith and Roberts (2022) found that around 60% of students expressed satisfaction with online learning experiences, highlighting that while many students value flexibility, they still face challenges that prevent them from reaching higher satisfaction levels. On the other hand, a study by Chung *et al.* (2021) reported that only 25% of students were fully satisfied with their online learning, suggesting that satisfaction is often hindered by a lack of interaction with instructors and technical difficulties.

Several challenges were identified through student interviews. A key issue was that lecturers often relied on a few students who were confident in answering questions. This created a situation where complex concepts were not fully understood by most students, as responses from only a few students were considered an indication of comprehension. For instance, when lecturers asked, 'Do you understand?' only a few students would affirmatively respond, yet many others were still unclear on the material. Additionally, students expressed frustration with the lack of support from group members during collaborative activities, which hindered effective group work. Time management difficulties were also mentioned, as students struggled to balance their academic workload with other responsibilities. Another challenge was the lack of proficiency in preparing presentations using computers, impacting students' ability to complete assignments effectively. Lastly, technical issues, such as difficulties with uploading activities due to poor internet connections or technical errors, were commonly cited. These issues were compounded by insufficient technical knowledge and interruption of the electricity, making it harder for students to navigate the online learning environment.

4.3 Challenges Faced by Lecturers

The fourth objective of this study is to explore the challenges faced by lecturers in the B.Ed. Honours in Special Needs Education degree program. In relation to this, Figure 2 presents the academic staff's working experience, shedding light on their preparedness for online teaching.

Figure 2: Working Experiences of the Academics (years)



As mentioned in Figure 2, twenty-five percent (25%) of the academics belong to the category of having less than five years of experience. Fifty percent of the academics (50%) belong to the 6–15 years of experience category. The remaining academics (25%) have more than 16 years of experience. On the other hand, 50% of the academics have less than 11 years of teaching experience.

Figure 3: Teachers' Preferences among Online and Face-to-face Teaching

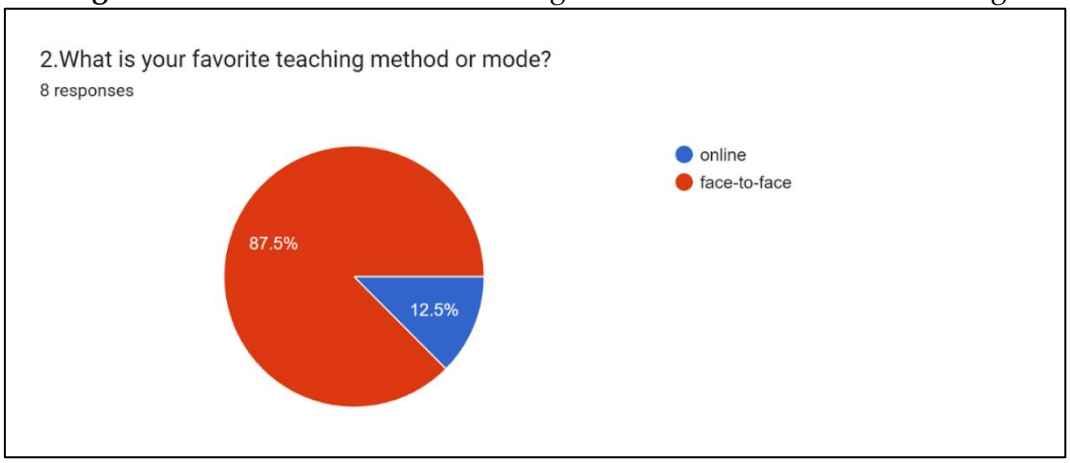


Figure 3 clearly shows that many of the lecturers (87.5%) prefer face-to-face teaching rather than online teaching. There are only 12.5% of the lecturers who are willing to teach online.

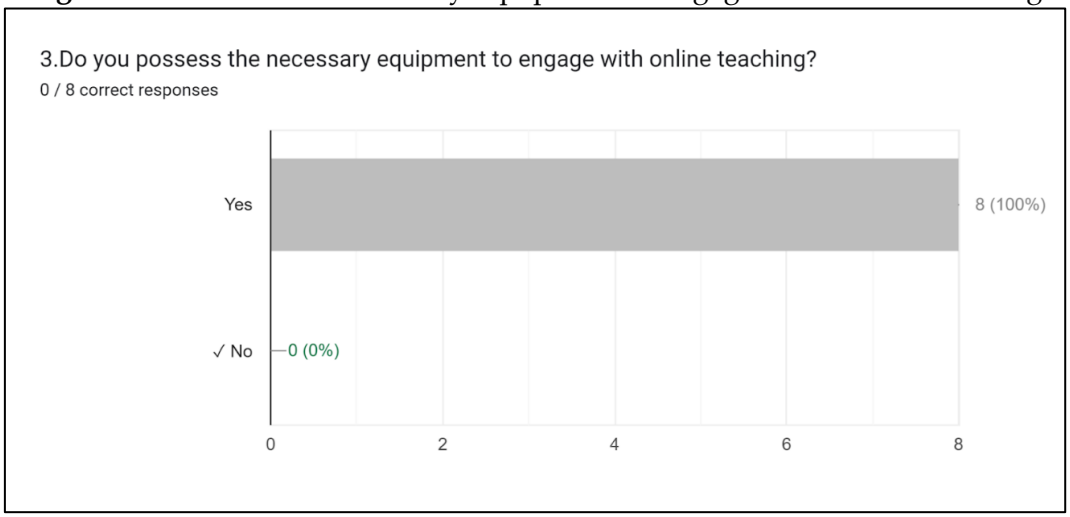
During the interview, it was revealed that during the online activities, the teacher cannot have eye contact with students, and the institution does not provide up-to-date

technologies to engage in online teaching, but with the face to face teaching, teachers can build real interaction with students, teachers can more easily understand whether the learners have understood the concept correctly, active students' participation can be seen in the teaching-learning process. One lecturer said that my students are adult learners, so they are not competent in using online platforms.

Also, one lecturer who is willing to teach online mentioned the following two reasons why he prefers online teaching: Firstly, he said, 'Waste my time for transportation' and most of the students, who are from around the country, would like to participate online.

According to the current research, 87.5% of lecturers prefer face-to-face sessions for teaching, emphasizing the effectiveness of direct interaction. This finding aligns with Koenig (2019), who reported that 72% of faculty members shared similar preferences, citing the interactive nature of in-person teaching. However, other studies, such as Jones, Smith, and Taylor (2021), found that a minority of lecturers favored online teaching for its flexibility and suitability for different learning needs.

Figure 4: Possession of Necessary Equipment to Engage with Online Teaching



According to Figure 4, all lecturers have acquired the necessary equipment to engage in online teaching activities. The interview revealed that all lecturers either have laptops provided by the university or their own. Additionally, all of them possess smartphones that allow them to access the internet. This ensures that the lecturers are adequately equipped to facilitate online learning, even in environments where access to technology may otherwise be limited.

Figure 5: Difficulties Faced by the Lecturers in Relation to Online Activity

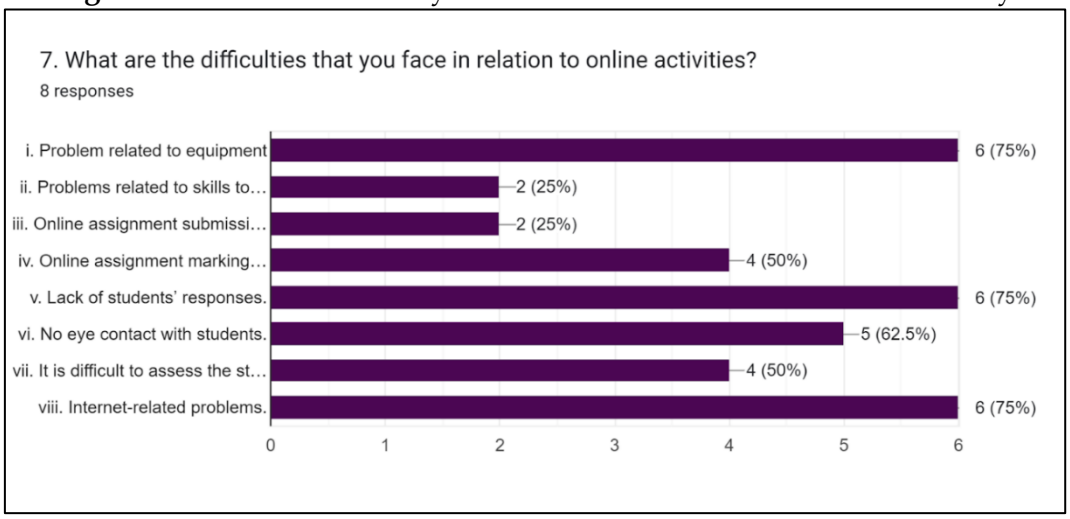


Figure 5 highlights the challenges faced by lecturers in online teaching. Seventy-five percent of lecturers reported three primary issues: problems with equipment, lack of student responsiveness, and internet-related difficulties. Additionally, sixty-three percent indicated challenges with maintaining students' eye contact, while fifty percent found it difficult to mark assignments and assess students' achievements online. Interviews further revealed other concerns, such as the lack of teacher-student and student-student interaction, some students lacking essential equipment and internet access, and less active participation during sessions. These findings underscore the need for improved technical support, student engagement strategies, and training programs to address these challenges effectively. The current research aligns with findings from Smith and Taylor (2021), who also identified technological issues, such as equipment and connectivity problems, as significant barriers to online teaching. However, while their study revealed that only 60% of lecturers faced challenges with technology, this research found that a higher percentage, 75%, of lecturers encountered these issues, highlighting a more widespread technological barrier in this context.

4.4 Suggestions Proposed by Students and Lecturers to Overcome Difficulties

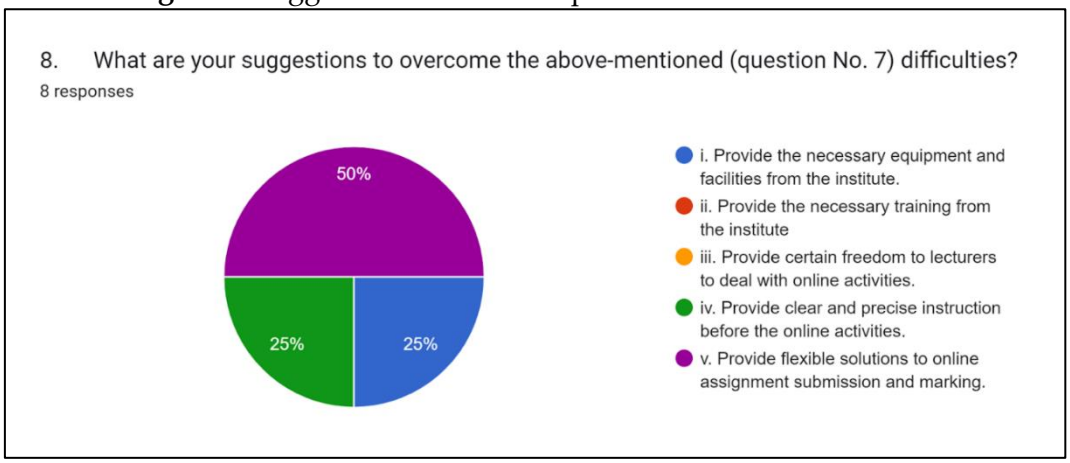
The following suggestions were made by students and lecturers in order to overcome the difficulties they faced in relation to online activities: These suggestions were collected via questionnaires and interviews.

The following suggestions were made by students to overcome the difficulties they encountered: Provide clear and precise instructions in relation to the online activities; provide more flexibility in relation to online activities; provide Internet facilities from the institute (within the premises); provide basic training from the institute in relation to skills needed for online activities; provide proper opportunities to make complaints and requests in relation to the online activities; and provide the necessary resources from the institute (within the premises).

In addition to the above student suggestions, lecturers also made some suggestions to overcome the difficulties encountered in the online activities. These

suggestions are clearly depicted in Figure 7, which provides a detailed overview of the recommendations for more sophisticated online activities to address the challenges in online activities.

Figure 7: Suggestions for More Sophisticated Online Activities



According to Figure 7, fifty percent of lecturers suggested implementing flexible solutions for online assignment submission and marking. Additionally, twenty-five percent of lecturers recommended that the institute provide necessary equipment and facilities, along with clear and precise instructions before online activities.

Further suggestions revealed through interviews included providing students with clear and relevant training on the online teaching-learning process. One lecturer proposed offering hands-on experiences, such as mock tests for activity-based assignments, to better prepare students. Another suggestion emphasized allocating more time for academic activities by reducing clerical burdens on lecturers. Moreover, improving access to better equipment and affordable internet facilities was highlighted as a crucial need.

5. Recommendations

Both lecturers and students have the necessary equipment (at least a mobile phone) and an Internet connection as well. The majority of the students are also willing to join online learning. So, we can conduct Day Schools online without much problem, but the selected students should be given the necessary facilities (computers with internet facilities) by the institute.

Lecturers face difficulties due to a lack of student responses and issues with maintaining students' eye contact. To address these challenges, lecturers could adopt strategies such as encouraging students to turn on their cameras, fostering discussions, and incorporating interactive questioning instead of relying solely on the lecture method.

Students and lecturers both faced a lot of difficulties in relation to the continuous assessment (activity-based assignment) and the difficulty of monitoring the students. So,

it is better if we can conduct some ABA in a physical classroom, considering the nature of the ABA.

Students should be given a convenient way to contact someone from the institute to listen to their grievances and solve their problems immediately in relation to the online activities.

6. Conclusion

The conclusions of the current research are presented according to the sequential order of the objectives of the study.

The Degree in Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education program is a four-year program with 120 credits. Level 5 and Level 6: Courses offered by the Department of Special Needs Education. This program is offered in all three media: Sinhala, Tamil, and English. This degree program conducted Day Schools and continuous assessment (CA) in physical classrooms (face-to-face) but with the COVID-19 pandemic, all Day Schools and CA were changed to online. As a whole, students have appropriate places at home to engage in online learning activities, but 24% of the students have no such place. Eighty-eight (88%) percent of the respondents (students) were at least satisfied with their technical knowledge. There are no dissatisfied or totally satisfied students with their technical knowledge. The majority of the respondents (56%) use mobile phones and mobile data (45%), followed by home Wi-Fi (24%), for their online activities in the degree program. Seventy-six percent (76%) of the respondent students have to face difficulties at the Day Schools in relation to the internet connection (slow internet connection (56%), and loss of connection (20%)). The majority of the students (47%) mentioned issues in relation to their device, such as sound that is not clear. Also, students (27%) mention their devices being stuck frequently. The majority of the students (36%) mention that they have to face difficulties when submitting activity reports, followed by the low clarity of the instructions given at the beginning of ABDA (25% mentioned that). Only 14% of the responding students have an appropriate place to engage with ABDS. On the other hand, 86% of the students do not have an appropriate place to engage with ABDS. Seventy-six percent (76%) of the students are at least moderately satisfied with the online activities of the program. As well, 22% of the students are dissatisfied or totally satisfied with the overall online activities. Due to the lack of cohesion in the students' groups, they have to face difficulties during the presentation. The reason is technical and internet problems. Sometimes, it is difficult to upload the activities or may not upload them within the stipulated time due to poor internet connection, technical error, poor technical knowledge, or interruption of the electricity. The majority of the lecturers (87.5%) prefer face-to-face teaching other than online teaching.

All the lecturers have acquired the necessary equipment to engage in online teaching activities. But lecturers were faced with difficulties in relation to online teaching. Namely, problems related to equipment, lack of students' responses, internet-related problems, problems with students' eye contact, online assignment marking and assessing

of students' achievement, lack of teacher-student and student-student relationships, some students not having necessary equipment and connection facilities, and less active participation.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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I am currently a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Secondary and Tertiary Education at the Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka. I have been working as a university academic for the past 15 years, and throughout my career, I have gained extensive teaching experience. My primary research interests lie in the fields of Educational Technology and Educational Sociology. Over the course of my career, I have published three articles in the European Journal of Education Studies, where I have also submitted this article for publication. In addition to my published works, I have presented several papers at national and international academic conferences, contributing to the broader academic community in my fields of expertise.

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