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Exploring Students' Perspectives On The Advantages And Disadvantages Of Online Learning: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract. This study examined postgraduate students' perspectives on the advantages anddisadvantages of online learning in Palembang, Indonesia. A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted for the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select six (6) students from Palembang Polytechnic who had previously engaged in online learning during their studies. The instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. The data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis, and member checking was conducted to ensure the trustworthiness of findings. Results showed that students generally perceived online learning as a dual experience. In terms of advantages, students highlighted geographical and time flexibility, time efficiency and cost savings, access to recorded materials, and the development of digital skills. In terms of disadvantages, students reported challenges related to unstable internet connections and unfavorable learning environments, limited access to suitable digital devices, and insufficient technological competence and academic guidance. The study revealed that the effectiveness of online learning is highly context-dependent and largely contingent upon the availability of proper digital infrastructure, adequate devices, and sustained instructional support. Institutions are encouraged to improve digital access, provide technical orientation for students prior to online learning, and maintain instructional assistance to balance self-directed and guided learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Online learning refers to the utilization of different software and electronic tools to impart knowledge and skills beyond the physical environment of a conventional classroom, giving learners more flexibility in determining when and where they study (Darius, N., et al. 2021), (Akpen, L., & Uwaifo, S. 2024). Even though the theory has been around for many years, the COVID-19 outbreak expedited its implementation worldwide, making online learning not just an option but the main means of acquiring knowledge (Karakose, T., & Demirkol, M. 2021). This rapid transformation triggered extensive discussion regarding its effectiveness, prompting studies on how students accepted, adapted to, and performed within this new educational reality (Zheng., et al. 2021).

The recent literature on the subject shows that online learning has proven itself to be an effective means of fulfilling educational demands at various educational stages.

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Educators understand that when the right curriculum and infrastructure are put into place, online learning can yield outcomes comparable to conventional teaching methods in classrooms (Saeed, M., & Khan, A. 2023). There are some definite strengths associated with online learning, including convenience, flexibility, and accessibility. Online learning is both time-saving and cost-effective for learners and promotes independent learning. However, significant disadvantages remain. The online setting can limit opportunities for face-to-face interaction, collaboration, and participation, which are regarded as important aspects in effective learning (Almahasees, ., et al. 2021).

Though there are several advantages of adopting this approach, making it work effectively also comes with challenges. According to a recent study, some of the factors that affect learners' engagement and satisfaction include poor internet connectivity, lack of adequate devices, and insufficient digital skills (Alzahrani, A. 2022). Other studies suggest that performance gaps diminish when technical support and digital competence are sufficient, meaning the success of this approach depends heavily on supporting conditions (Gamage, S., et al. 2022). With this being said, it is essential to look at both perspectives. It is what the present research aims to do, that is, investigate the students' views of the pros and cons of online learning. The research question guiding this study is: What are students' perspectives regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online learning?

Online learning is one of the significant elements of the modern education system, considering that the development of technology has been rapid and flexible means of teaching have become increasingly important. The term online learning refers to the application of technology and Internet-based communications to enhance information sharing and learning assessments. The existing research stresses the importance of accessibility as a primary advantage of online learning — that is, learning materials can be accessed at any time from any location (Imran, M., et al. 2023), (Halupa, C., & Bolliger, D.U. 2022). Post-pandemic changes have led to a reformatting of education to be more learner-centric in nature. Yet, questions remain concerning the effectiveness of online learning.

Online learning is grounded in theories such as Constructivism, which assumes that learners develop their knowledge through interaction and experience (Halupa, C., & Bolliger, D.U. 2022), (Zaki, M.S. 2022). It also relates to the concept of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), in which the responsibility for personal learning belongs to students. According to empirical evidence, flexibility, the opportunity to revisit class materials, and lower cost of education are the main characteristics contributing to enhanced learning outcomes (Dost, S., et al. 2022). On the other hand, there are different perspectives about this concept in contemporary literature. This means that while flexibility enables learners to be autonomous, it may also lead to procrastination, and self-directed learning is beneficial for students with enough self-control.

The review of the existing literature identifies some limitations that need to be addressed. First, previous studies mainly use the quantitative method of analysis, where statistics prevail over the experiences of learners themselves. Moreover, the conclusions made by researchers in their work are often not contextualized as they fail to account for various aspects such as technical preparedness, socioeconomic status, and learning environment at home (Alzahrani, A. 2022). What remains underexplored is the lived reality of online education as experienced by students in specific local settings. The present study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative approach focused on students in Palembang, Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted using qualitative methods, employing a descriptive design to collect data related to students' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages

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of online learning. Qualitative research offers a comprehensive overview of the research problem from participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the issues at hand (Creswell, J.W., & Creswell, J.D. 2024). Therefore, the qualitative research method chosen will assist in examining how participants interpret their experiences.

This study was conducted at Palembang Polytechnic, involving students who had previously participated in online learning during their studies. Purposive sampling was used in sample collection because it facilitated the selection of respondents with prior experience with the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas, L.A., et al. 2022). Six respondents were sampled to participate in this study: three males and three females. Respondents' names are withheld to maintain anonymity. Respondents were 18 years old.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the research instrument in this study. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because of their flexibility, allowing researchers to further explore respondents' responses (Turner III, D.W. 2021). The questions asked during the interviews were modified from previous research, taking into account the objectives of this study. The average interview session lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or through an online platform.

For data analysis purposes, transcription was performed manually in this study. Before coding the data, the researcher carefully reviewed each transcript several times to familiarize themselves with the data. Next, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach that aims to identify, analyze, and report patterns across qualitative data (Braun, V., & Clarke, V. 2022). To ensure data reliability, member checking was conducted by returning transcripts to participants for confirmation (Shenton, A.K. 2021).

Tabel 1. Background of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
DS1	18	Female
DS2	18	Female
DS3	18	Male
DS4	18	Female
DS5	18	Male
DS6	18	Male

Sumber: Primary data, 2026

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Analysis of interviews conducted with six students indicates that online learning is a dual experience, offering both advantages and disadvantages. The interview results are organized into three main themes: (1) General Experiences, (2) Perceived Advantages, and (3) Perceived Disadvantages. A summary of the identified advantages and disadvantages is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Tabel 2. Advantages of Project-Based Learning

Advantages
Geographical and Time Flexibility
Time Efficiency and Cost Savings
Access to Recorded Materials and Digital Skill Development

Sumber: Primary data, 2026

Tabel 3. Disadvantages of Project-Based Learning

Disadvantages

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Unstable Internet Connection and Unfavorable Environment
Limited Access to Suitable Digital Devices
Insufficient Technological Competence and Guidance

Sumber: Primary data, 2026

4.1. General Experiences of Online Learning

In general, the respondents felt that online learning was well-balanced, but it was highly dependent on contextual factors. It was unanimously acknowledged by the participants that online learning was pragmatic but not as motivating as classroom learning. In most cases, it was stated that the procedure itself was relatively easy but boring and difficult to concentrate on.

> *"The online learning system has worked out quite well for me even though at times it becomes quite boring. Normally, I take part in class online, make notes of the main points covered, and do my homework after attending class." (DS1)*
>
> *"Online learning is quite beneficial as I get to learn from any location and it provides more freedom with regard to time. Although it is quite practical, at times it tends to bore me and make me concentrate less than direct classroom learning." (DS4)*

For some, the experience was neutral or mixed, determined mainly by personal effort and interest in the subject

> *"So far, my experience with online learning can be said to be 50/50, because there are enjoyable things and there are unpleasant things too. I usually just study again via the internet if there is material I do not understand." (DS2)*

However, strongly negative views were also expressed, particularly by students who faced technical issues or felt unsupported in the learning process.

> *"From my experience, online learning was the worst learning experience I have ever had, because the material was difficult to understand and also internet limitations made online learning very inefficient. I studied independently with minimal guidance from the teacher. " (DS3)*
>
> *"My experience with online learning is very inefficient for me, whereas my routine is always to wake up early and go to campus." (DS6)*

The participants have also pointed out boredom and a lack of enthusiasm as common problems, particularly among those who spent extended periods staring at a screen.

> *"The advantage is that it is more flexible because I do not need to come to campus, so time and energy can be saved. But sometimes I feel bored easily and lack enthusiasm because I stare at the screen for too long." (DS5)*

4.2. Perceived Advantages of Online Learning

Despite mixed feelings, every participant identified at least one advantage. These align closely with findings from recent studies regarding flexibility, efficiency, and skill development (Darius, N., et al. 2021), (Imran, M., et al. 2023).

4.2.1. Geographical and Time Flexibility

Among the advantages that people derived from learning included flexibility in terms of time and place. It is worth noting that students liked the freedom of learning, meaning that it was not confined within one classroom and one time frame but flexible to fit into learners' own time schedules.

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"The advantage of e-learning is that you can learn from any place you happen to be. You can learn even when you travel back home.You don't need to miss class just because you cannot physically attend the class." (DS1)

"I think the good thing about e-learning is that you can learn anytime and anywhere. We can be more flexible with time and very time-efficient." (DS6)

4.2.2. Time Efficiency and Cost Savings

Time-saving was another important factor among others. Students found that they had enough time to rest and study individually without worrying about their daily commute. From the economic point of view, participants stated that they can save money from transportation and food expenses and allocate it to something else.

"I do not need to waste one hour every day traveling back and forth. Instead, I utilize the time in preparing for my online classes." (DS3)

"The cost of travelling and lunch at school is really high. Through studying online, we will save on those costs." (DS4)

4.2.3. Access to Recorded Materials and Digital Skill Development

The ability to listen to recorded lectures became another positive aspect, because one could study the difficult information independently and as many times as needed. Additionally, regular use of digital platforms contributed to the development of technological competence valuable for future employment.

"If I don't understand some information, I have an opportunity to watch the video as often as necessary without shame, because I consider it shameful to constantly ask questions to my teacher." (DS2)

"Without realizing it, participating in online classes made me much more proficient in using technology, ranging from video conference applications, sharing documents, to digital discussion forums. This skill turned out to be very useful in my workplace too." (DS5)

4.3. Perceived Disadvantages of Online Learning

All participants acknowledged significant disadvantages that affected their concentration and comprehension. These align with three main challenge areas identified in recent literature: technical instability, inadequate devices, and lack of guidance (Alzahrani, A. 2022),(Adedoyin, O.B., & Soykan, E. 2023).

4.3.1. Unstable Internet Connection and Unfavorable Environment

Technical instability and unsuitable study environments were the most frequently reported disadvantages. Poor network signals or noisy home settings disrupted the flow of learning, leading to confusion or missed content.

"I sometimes experience problems such as an unstable internet network or an uncomfortable home atmosphere. When the connection suddenly slows down, the instructor's voice cuts off and I lose important parts of the explanation. I have to guess the content of the missed material."(DS1)

Connection issues also caused anxiety and reduced willingness to participate in class discussions.

"I once could not attend an online class because the signal suddenly disappeared. Situations like this make me anxious every time there is an important class and reduce my confidence to participate actively." (DS5)

"My main difficulty in online learning is understanding the material because the situation around me is inadequate." (DS6)

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4.3.2. Limited Access to Suitable Digital Devices

Access to devices was one of the disadvantages. Some learners were forced to share devices or make use of small phone screens, which made reading text in the lessons or using advanced software difficult.

> *"At home, I have only one computer that I need to share with my elder brother. At times, I am even forced to attend class using cell phones with small screens, where reading text from presentations becomes challenging." The availability of capable devices greatly influences how far I can follow lessons." (DS2)*
>
> *"My laptop is old and often cannot run several video conference applications at once. I feel left behind by friends who have more sophisticated devices because I cannot optimally access all the learning features provided." (DS3)*

4.3.3. Insufficient Technological Competence and Guidance

Many students struggled with the platforms themselves.The time allocated was used to understand how to work with the technology rather than learn the lessons. The move towards self-paced learning without proper guidance by the teachers was an additional challenge.

> *"I had never used any of the numerous online learning platforms before. I found myself at a loss on how to use the microphone, share the screen and upload my assignments. Much of my time went to learning the technology, not learning the lesson content." (DS4)*

This difficulty was further compounded by insufficient guidance from teachers, which left students to navigate both the technology and the subject matter on their own.

> *"I studied independently with minimal guidance from the teacher." (DS3)*

DISCUSSION

The results from this research further show that online learning is naturally dualistic, having both pros and cons, as well as varied perspectives depending on the situation (Darius, N., et al. 2021),(Imran, M., et al. 2023). In answering the posed question, "What are students' perspectives regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online learning?", the results suggest that students perceive positively online learning due to its flexibility, affordability, and prospects for acquiring technological skills; while disadvantages are related mainly to lack of proper facilities, lack of gadgets, and poor academic support services. Therefore, online learning effectiveness largely depends on the situation in which it is implemented.

Flexibility in terms of geography and time was considered the greatest strength by all participants, in line with the definition and results obtained from several recent studies (Akpen, L., & Uwaifo, S. 2024), (Imran, M., et al. 2023). The students appreciated the freedom to study anywhere at any time, which is inherent to contemporary online learning programs. This flexibility eliminates the geographical constraint and makes learning convenient for the learner's schedule.

The other notable result included time efficiency and reduced costs, which coincided with studies by Akpen and Uwaifo (2024). The reduction in travel time helped to manage time more effectively, as well as use energy for studying or relaxation. Economically, it

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made sense to the family since the costs of going to the campus on a daily basis were lowered.

Access to learning materials and skills development is consistent with the theories of Constructivism and Self-Regulated Learning (Halupa, C., & Bolliger, D.U. 2022).The fact that the lectures were recorded implies that the learners are able to study on their own and repeat material that they have not understood in the first place without the stress of being in any kind of social environment. Moreover, improved digital literacy is another benefit.

Inconsistencies in internet connections and unfavorable learning environments were the two major barriers, corroborating the results of Alzahrani (2022).In addition, the two variables conflict with the Constructivist demand for stability in communication and knowledge acquisition. Knowledge creation is hindered when there is inconsistency in either the medium through which it is acquired or the environment itself.

The problem of lack of access to good devices brings out the issue of educational inequity in online learning, as explained by Saeed & Khan (2023).The research explains that the level of participation of the students depends highly on the kind of tools that they have access to. The need to share or use poorly defined tools reduces their ability to take part in the lessons, resulting in educational inequity, where some learners perform better than others due to insufficient facilities.

The lack of proficiency in technical knowledge and academic help goes against the notion that students are equipped enough to engage in self-paced learning through the Internet (Gamage, S., et al. (2022).The research indicates that the lack of technical knowledge and consistent academic guidance makes it impossible for learners to engage in interaction with the online system and understand the course contents (Imran, M., et al. (2023), (Halupa, C., & Bolliger, D.U. 2022).

In essence, this research shows that the success of online learning can be achieved only through the provision of proper infrastructure, appropriate technology, and continuous guidance. In absence of such prerequisites, the concept falls flat. It is very context-dependent, meaning that what will work well in places where there are ample resources may be insufficient for places with fewer resources when it comes to technology. In cases like Palembang, this means the need to improve their infrastructure first.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be argued that online learning has emerged as a double-edged approach to education with unique benefits and challenges from the point of view of the learners. In particular, learners enrolled in a Polytechnic institution based in Palembang viewed online learning favorably in relation to its flexible nature in relation to time and location, effective time and cost management, ease of accessing recordings of lessons, and development of digital literacy. Nonetheless, there were some major problems associated with online learning such as poor Internet connectivity, improper study environment, inadequate equipment, and lack of expertise in using technology.

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Effectiveness of the entire process was greatly contingent upon having appropriate infrastructure, sufficient technology support, and the preparedness of the students. To enhance the results of the process, institutions should aim to facilitate reliable digital resources, ensure appropriate technological orientation among the students before engaging them in online courses, and sustain instructional assistance as a way of maintaining a balance between self-learning and guided learning.

There are several limitations associated with this study. One is that the study utilized a sample size of six students drawn from one institution only, making it possible that the results obtained from the study would not be very generalizable. This can be addressed by increasing the sample size in future studies.

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