

Building Resilience in Online Higher Education Facilitators: Mitigating Emotional Exhaustion

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Abstract: The increasing occurrence of online teaching has introduced unique challenges for facilitators, particularly concerning emotional exhaustion and burnout. The purpose of this study was to understand how online facilitators in higher education experience and navigate these challenges. The paper draws on findings presented in the author's doctoral dissertation, and explores the relationship between resilience, emotional exhaustion, and self-efficacy and how resilience can serve as a protective factor against emotional exhaustion among online facilitators at a private higher education institution in South Africa. A qualitative research approach was employed, adopting a case study design within an interpretivist paradigm. Data generation was conducted through an initial online survey sent to 1220 facilitators, from which 188 responses were received. The survey aimed to assess facilitators' levels of self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion and resilience. A purposive sampling strategy, informed by the scores achieved for each section of the survey, was used to identify ten participants for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The sample included five facilitators who demonstrated high self-efficacy and resilience, along with minimal indicators of emotional exhaustion, and five who displayed low self-efficacy levels and resilience, and significant indicators of emotional exhaustion. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes, focusing on work-life balance, the role of technology, adaption versus replication of teaching strategies, and the importance of resilience in maintaining engagement and effectiveness in online teaching. Findings showed that facilitators with high resilience were better able to manage emotional exhaustion. This was mainly because of their ability to establish clear work-life boundaries, use technology effectively, and adapt their teaching methods rather than replicating traditional classroom practices in an online setting. On the contrary, those with lower resilience reported greater emotional strain, challenges in adapting to online teaching, and heightened anxiety regarding the use of online tools. The findings of the study have wider implications beyond the specific institution studied, providing valuable insights for higher education institutions globally. As online education continues to grow, it is crucial to ensure that institutions provide the necessary support strategies for facilitators to build their resilience and ensure their emotional well-being in what can be a challenging teaching and learning environment.

Keywords: Resilience, Emotional exhaustion, Burnout, Self-Efficacy, Online higher education, Teaching adaptation, Work-Life balance, Faculty well-being

1. Introduction and Background

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the constructs of resilience, emotional well-being, and burnout had been well-researched across a range of settings and contexts, including that of online education. With the advent of the pandemic in 2020, the focus was once again directed towards the impact of these phenomena on the lives of students and those tasked with having to support them online. While Singapore rapidly implemented measures to ensure that the needs of students were met during this time (Lim, 2020), China launched the government supported "Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning" initiative (Huang, Liu, Tlili, Yang, Wang, Jemni and Burgos, 2020). The United States opted to look ahead to schools reopening and understanding what measures would need to be in place once restrictions were lifted (Minkos and Gelbar, 2021). In Australia, Green, Anderson, Tait, and Tran (2020) focused on the impact on students being isolated from campus and peer support, while Nartiningrum and Nugroho, (2020) looked at Indonesia and challenges faced regarding connectivity. Other aspects of the pandemic, such as loss of employment, isolation, or the passing of a family member, were explored by Cordaro, 2020, Ferren, 2021, and Moir, 2021. Although there were studies, such as those of Aperribai, Cortabarria, Aquirre, Verche and Borges, (2020) and Lizana, Vega-Fernandez, Gomez-Bruton, Leyton and Lera, (2021) which addressed the impact of the crisis on the family, work, and social lives of teaching staff, the attention seemed to be focused firmly on the plight of students, particularly when viewed from within the context of South Africa (Landa, Zhou, and Marongwe, 2021; Le Grange, 2021; Motala and Menon, 2020). In the wake of the pandemic, research has begun to emerge that addresses the constructs of resilience, emotional exhaustion, and burnout among educators (Malesa, 2022; Padmanabhanunni, Pretorius, Bouchard and Stiegler,

2023; Spies, 2022), however, these studies have focused almost exclusively on teachers based in primary and secondary school environments rather than those facilitating in higher education settings.

2. Problem Statement

As noted, the constructs of self-efficacy and that of burnout are certainly not new. A review of the literature has revealed multiple studies on both self-efficacy and burnout among teachers, however, many of these were conducted in a pre-pandemic context. Since the advent of COVID-19, international studies have begun to emerge that investigate self-efficacy as a moderator of facilitator stress, the ability to cope with the challenges of shifting teaching practice online, and as a potential means of combatting burnout and emotional fatigue. What remains elusive, however, were any South African-based endeavours that focus on HE settings, and the potential for developing greater resilience among facilitators as a means of nurturing improved self-efficacy and emotional well-being. A study such as this is has value in that it not only adds to the narrative surrounding these constructs in HE settings, but also provides institutions with suggestions for improving resilience and self-efficacy among their online facilitators - whether during the next crisis, or simply in the 'normal' day-to-day course of events.

3. Aims and Objectives

This paper draws on findings originally presented in the author's doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2024, and aims to address this apparent gap by engaging with individuals in HE settings who, outside of the context of the pandemic, continue to facilitate their modules in a fully online mode of delivery. Through a better understanding of the challenges they face, institutions will be better positioned to implement strategies aimed at building resilience in these individuals, thus providing them with the necessary fortitude to stave off the onset of emotional exhaustion and burnout. This aim is in keeping with the ideas of Yildirim, Arslan and Wong (2022) who identified resilience as a critical factor in protecting against the onset of burnout, particularly in the domain of emotional exhaustion.

4. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the notion of resilience and the construct of emotional exhaustion as experienced by online facilitators.

4.1 Defining Resilience

Definitions of resilience abound, however there are certain characteristics that are inherent in many of these. Firstly, resilience is associated with an individual's ability to deal with threats or adversity which could potentially undermine their normal progress and development (Bertsia & Poulou, 2022, Gu & Day, 2007). Secondly, there is the suggestion that while many may have an innate measure of resilience, resilience is very much context-driven (Bertsia & Poulou, 2022, Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000) and can either be enhanced or impeded by the setting in which someone finds themselves, the people with whom they associate, and their mental fortitude. Finally, rather than being a static trait, resilience is something that can be "built up over time" (Sneha & Maheswari, 2021:33).

4.2 The Notion of Resilience

The disciplines of psychiatry and psychology were the first to grapple with the notion of resilience in relation to the ability of some children to grow and prosper despite their risk of being negatively impacted by challenging life circumstances (Howard, Dryden and Johnson, 1999). The 1980's saw a more positive slant in the research on resilience, with the focus shifting to the strengths associated with an individual's ability to adapt during times of crisis (Henderson and Milstein, 2003). In the years since, studies have begun to explore the "underlying protective processes" associated with resilience, in other words, how certain personal traits and protective factors might contribute to a positive outcome (Luther, Cicchetti and Becker, 2000:3). Gu and Day (2007) draw our attention to the work of Fredrickson (2004) who advocated that personal resources can be accrued, and that "through experiences of positive emotions ... people transform themselves, becoming more creative, knowledgeable, resilient, socially integrated, and healthy individuals" (Fredrickson, 2004:1369). Lantieri, Kyse, Harnett, Malkmus, Reevy, and Frydenberg (2011:267) add to this by suggesting that people can be taught to become more resilient through emersion in positive and supportive environments, and by those who are more "stress hardy" than themselves. As such, resilience is a dynamic construct that can be developed in individuals, increasing their ability to persevere during challenging times (Gu and Day, 2007; Howard et al., 1999; Luther et al., 2000).

4.3 Resilience Within the Context of Online Education

Duckworth (2016:2) refers to the notion of “grit”, and the “determination and direction” that individuals with grit display. Naidu (2021:3) expands on this by suggesting that resilience is a product of grit, made up of “passion and perseverance”, and is something that can be “developed and enhanced through direct action”. He goes on to encourage educational institutions to implement proactive support strategies to foster greater resilience, particularly around the “acts of teaching and learning” (*ibid*). This suggestion is supported by the study of Liu, Zhao and Su (2022), who found that teachers with reportedly high levels of resilience were also those whose students fared better academically, and the study of Abdolrezapour, Ganjeh and Ghanbari (2023) who identified resilience as a predictor of student motivation and success in online learning contexts.

4.4 Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion, recognised as one of the three associated domains of burnout, refers to feelings of depletion and an overextension of one’s emotional reserves, as well as an increase in apathy and a reduced sense of care and concern for others (Koenig, 2014, Maslach and Leiter, 2008, Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001). Even in a pre-pandemic context, emotional exhaustion and burnout were recognised as areas of concern for facilitators involved in online engagement. While Hislop and Ellis, (2004), noted that online engagement required more planning than contact delivery, Hogan, McKnight, and Legier (2006) highlighted the complexities associated with facilitating in an online learning environment, and Dunlap (2005) noted that the assumption of a constant online support presence risked burnout among facilitators involved in this mode of delivery. During the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional exhaustion presented as a real concern among online facilitators at a private higher education institution in South Africa, where a study by Scheepers (2024) found that even highly self-efficacious participants presented with unexpectedly elevated scores in this domain. A post-pandemic study conducted by Lucas and Vicente, (2023) which interrogated the perceived challenges experienced by 636 online facilitators across 54 countries, highlighted one of the challenges of online facilitation as being ‘self-management’, which includes the ability to regulate one’s emotions and manage time successfully. These findings are further supported by several international studies that found that the stressors associated with moving all engagement fully online, as well as trying to cope with the demands of ensuring student wellbeing during the crisis, added to the experienced emotional exhaustion and burnout among facilitators (Cordaro, 2020, Kendrick, 2021, Trinidad, 2021, Yang, 2021).

4.5 Resilience and Emotional Exhaustion

De los Reyes, Blannin, Cohnssen, and Mahat (2022:50) define facilitator resilience as “the dynamic process and interaction between an academic and their everchanging environment that uses available internal and external resources to produce positive outcomes in response to different contextual, environmental, and developmental challenges”. Several studies speak to the importance of building resilience among facilitators as a means of increasing self-efficacy and avoiding the onset of emotional exhaustion and burnout within educational settings (Beltman, 2021; Mullen, Shields and Tienken, 2021; Wang, Tsai, Lee and Ko, 2021). While Richards, Levesque-Bristol, Templin, and Graber (2016:530) suggest that “teachers who develop higher levels of resilience feel less emotionally drained, derive a greater sense of satisfaction from their work, and can interact positively with others”. Resilience is not confined to defence mechanisms triggered by adversity. Recent research has shown that there are positive conditions that can shape resilience, and which have the effect of increasing the resilience of employees in organisations.

In summary, Recognising the need to leverage the lessons learnt from the pandemic, this study aimed to interrogate the notion of building resilience as a means of encouraging greater self-efficacy among online facilitators, thus providing them with an internal support mechanism that would fortify them against the demands of online engagement, whether during the next crisis or simply as a means of coping with the day-to-day demands of facilitating online.

5. Conceptual Framework

Although resilience is empirically closely related to self-efficacy, it is important to note that they are theoretically distinct (Schueler, Fritz, Dorfschmidt, Van Harmelen, Stroemer and Wessa, 2021). While resilience is closely aligned with one’s ability to ‘bounce back’ from adversity, self-efficacy can still be present without stressors (Bertsia and Poulou, 2023). This notwithstanding, resilience and self-efficacy are often discussed in tandem, with an alignment being made between how self-efficacious someone is and their levels of persistence and resilience, suggesting that the more one is resilient and able to triumph over adversity, the more one’s sense of self-efficacy is likely to be affirmed (Schwarzer and Warner, 2013). Studies have also found a significant and negative

relationship between resilience and burnout (Hong, Tae and Noh, 2012; Karimi and Adam, 2018; Richards, et al., 2016), suggesting that resilient people are also far less likely to succumb to the impact of burnout. Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship between these three constructs and provides the conceptual framework for this study.

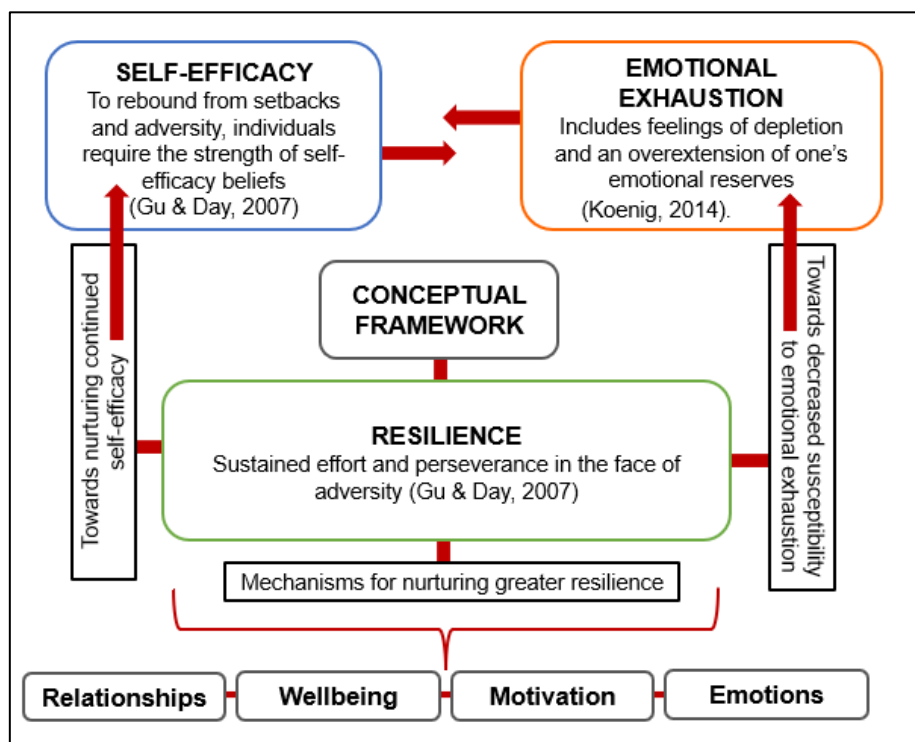


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Source: researchers' own)

The conceptual framework for this study highlights the interplay between these three constructs and the role that resilience might play in nurturing both improved self-efficacy, and reducing the risk of emotional exhaustion.

6. Methodology: Design and Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study as it is one that allows the researcher to explore and understand the “meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014:32). This qualitative study was prompted by an interest in exploring the challenges faced by online facilitators in higher education, and the role that their perceived level of resilience might play in their ability to mitigate the onset of one of the defining factors of burnout: emotional exhaustion.

A South African based higher education institution provided the setting for this study, with its facilitators comprising the population and sample. This constitutes what Creswell and Poth, (2016:61) would refer to as a “bounded system”, making this a case study by design. Adopting this approach allowed the researchers to engage with participants as they shared their stories and lived experiences of what it means to engage with their students in an online environment, including the day-to-day challenges commensurate with same. For this qualitative study, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted, based on the notion that reality is socially constructed and “emerges from the way in which individuals and groups interact and experience the world” (Van Wynsberghe & Khan, 2007:90). Through the shared experiences of the participants a picture emerges of how important resilience is in mitigating the onset of emotional exhaustion, and suggests practical ways in which this can be achieved. These are more fully explored later in this study.

6.1 Population and Sample

An online survey was sent to 1 220 facilitators contracted to the selected institution, providing the population for this study. The purpose of the survey was to gather information regarding how facilitators were experiencing the demands of engaging in a fully online environment. Questions were posed that focused on their ability to adapt their teaching practice for the online environment, their confidence with leveraging digital tools for the

purpose of instruction, and their perceived success in supporting students and gauging their academic success. From the survey links shared, 188 responses were received. Rather than using the data from this survey for comparative statistical analysis, the scores were used to identify potential participants for a series of semi-structured interviews. In keeping with qualitative research principles, which emphasises in-depth analysis, we felt that ten purposively selected participants was sufficient to obtain the insights and data saturation we were seeking. Prior to these engagement taking place, ethical clearance was secured from the institution (Ref:00084), and informed consent was sought and received from each of the ten participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and anonymity was achieved through the use of pseudonyms. As per policy, the data from the survey and semi-structured interviews has been stored on a secure institutional system.

6.2 Tools and Data Collection

The digital survey presented respondents with a series of questions under the headings of ‘Self-Efficacy’ and ‘Emotional Exhaustion’. Responses were scored between 0 to 4 in both sections, with zero being attributed to ‘I could do nothing’, and four being “I could do a great deal” in the section focusing on self-efficacy, and zero for “I felt highly motivated”, to four for “I felt overwhelmed” in the section focusing on emotional exhaustion. Table 1 provides an example of some of the questions posed in the survey, possible responses, and how these were scored.

Table 1: Examples of survey questions, responses and scores (Source: researchers’ own)

Self-Efficacy	<i>To what extent are you able to navigate the institutional LMS to successfully facilitate your module/s online?</i>	<i>To what extent are you able to navigate the internet in order to provide links and/or additional resources for your online students?</i>	<i>To what extent are you able to use your synchronous sessions to maximise interaction between students?</i>	SCORE
Example Only	I can do a great deal (4)	I can do quite a bit (3)	I can do some (2)	9
Example Only	I can do nothing (0)	I can do very little (1)	I can do some (2)	3
Emotional Exhaustion	<i>I sometimes have trouble sleeping and wake up feeling exhausted</i>	<i>I find it hard to concentrate and can be absentminded</i>	<i>Between the demands of teaching online and my family – I have very little left to give</i>	SCORE
Example Only	I never feel like this (0)	I feel like this a few times (1)	I feel like this once a week (2)	3
Example Only	I feel like this once a week (2)	I feel like this a few times each week (3)	I feel like this every day (4)	9

Based on the scores achieved, the sample group comprised five individuals who had presented with low levels of resilience and self-efficacy, and significant indicators of emotional exhaustion, and five individuals with high self-efficacy scores, and minimal indicators of emotional exhaustion. The data gleaned from their survey responses was used to guide the engagement during the interviews, with participants being asked to comment on the scores achieved or to elaborate on certain questions in more detail. For this particular study, the age, ethnicity, tenure, and online teaching experience of the participants were not considered, instead the researchers were interested in the scores achieved for the survey, and the participants’ willingness to share their experiences of facilitating their modules in a fully online context.

Prior to the semi-structured interviews, the questions were piloted with a group of volunteers to determine clarity of wording and intent. Based on the feedback received, question nine was amended to ensure the validation of experienced emotions rather than diminishing the individual’s experience in any way, however unintentional. This amendment is presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Amendment to question nine after pilot exercise (Source: researchers’ own).

Interview question 9	
Original	<i>“Did you find that you were ever irrational and quick to anger”.</i>
Amended to	<i>“Did you ever experience heightened emotions that threatened to get the better of you?”.</i>

Through detailed inductive thematic analysis of the participants’ shared experiences, themes were sought that would guide the reader through a seamless flow of inductive reasoning (Fouché, 2021, Malakar, 2022).

Transcripts of the interviews were manually transcribed to allow for a deeper emersion in each of the stories, and to ensure that the voices of the participants directed the course of the narrative (Maree et al., 2016, Terrel, 2016). These transcripts were then re-read over several iterations to define and refine the final three sub-themes which served to address the main theme of determining what can be done to minimise emotional exhaustion and promote resilience among online facilitators in higher education.

6.3 Questions Asked and Themes Explored

As noted, the overarching intention behind this study was to determine what might cause emotional exhaustion in online facilitators within a higher education setting and how improving their levels of resilience might prevent them from experiencing this phenomenon in the future. Five purposively selected participants who had presented with high levels of self-efficacy and resilience were encouraged to share their experiences of facilitating online and why they believe they have been able to avoid succumbing to the symptoms associated with burnout, particularly that of emotional exhaustion. In tandem with this, five other participants who had presented with low levels of resilience and self-efficacy were asked to share their stories, and what impact their experience of emotional exhaustion has had on their lives and their engagement with their students.

6.4 Context and General Participant Information

The institution at which this study was conducted was first established in 1991. In the 33 years since its inception, it has grown to comprise nine contact campuses across the country, and an online centre established in 2017. It is the experiences of the facilitators tasked with supporting these online students that was of particular interest to the researchers.

As noted, a survey was distributed with the intention of purposively identifying ten individuals who would then participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The tenure of the ten participants in this study ranged from five to 19 years in higher education, with each having had at least two years' experience in online facilitation. The participants comprised seven women and three males, aged 36 to 'older than 55'. Areas of specialisation in terms of subject matter expertise included the Social Sciences, Finance and Accounting, Business Management, and Communication Science. It is relevant to note that although specific modules facilitated by each participant were not intentionally highlighted during the interviews, some reference has been made to these in order to provide a context for certain participant quotes included in the discussion. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. A summary of these participants is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3: A summary of study participants and their scores (Source: researcher's own)

Group One	Participants				
Low Self-Efficacy / High Emotional Exhaustion	Siva	Hannah	Alison	Malcolm	Nelly
Self-Efficacy / 50	8	12	18	18	15
Emotional Exhaustion / 20	14	14	12	14	14
Group Two	Participants				
High Self-Efficacy / Low Emotional Exhaustion	Layla	Craig	Paula	Tamika	Louise
Self-Efficacy / 50	37	31	36	31	36
Emotional Exhaustion / 20	6	6	6	9	8

7. Data Analysis And Discussion

Through a process of reiterative reading and thematic analysis, four sub-themes were identified to support the main theme of determining how to minimise emotional exhaustion and promote resilience among online facilitators in higher education.

7.1 Sub-themes

1. Balance through boundaries
2. Technology as help or hinderance
3. Adaptation rather than replication
4. Resilience is the key

Each of these are discussed from the perspective of those more self-efficacious and resilient participants who appear to thrive in an online teaching and learning environment, and those with lower levels of self-efficacy and reduced resilience who often find the challenges of facilitating in this environment to be emotionally exhausting.

7.2 Sub-Theme 1: Balance Through Boundaries

A study by Bauwens, Muylaert, Clarysse, Audenaert, and Decramer, (2020:3) suggests that “depending on how employees manage the boundaries between their work and life domains, activities in one domain can create spillovers to the other domain, resulting in role conflict or role confusion”. Similarly, participants in this study who shared that they experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion were also those who admitted that they often allowed the boundaries to blur between their responsibilities outside of the online teaching environment and their commitment to supporting their students. When participants in this study were asked about their ability to maintain a work-life balance while supporting their students through online facilitation, each of the ten highlighted the importance of achieving their own sense of balance on a daily basis; with some sharing the negative impact that an absence of this balance can have on their lives. One participant (Nelly) shared that if she does not plan her life, and put boundaries in place, she “is a mess”, with hours and days blurring, and a compounded sense of not “getting to everything that needs taking care of”. Hannah, another participant, explained that she found maintaining a day-to-day balance to be a challenge, and that often the demands of work, family, and other external commitments “collide”.

Khateeb (2021:28), citing Kirchmeyer (2000), suggests that work-life balance is the “achievement of fulfilling experiences in the different aspects of life that require various resources, like energy, time and commitment, and these resources are spread across all the domains”. This balance is not always easy to achieve, especially for those facilitating in higher education settings where the prevalence of technologies creates an environment where facilitators are potentially accessible to their students at any time of the day or night (Ilić-Kosanović, 2021; Parham & Rauf, 2020). As two participants shared:

Alison: It can all just become too much, you know. When a student messages me I feel they need me to respond then and there. I know I would want a quick response so I feel like I cannot make them wait. It can be quite exhausting to keep up.

Siva: I can't switch off. I will check my WhatsApp after hours, and if there is a question, I feel like I need to answer it right away. It can sometimes go on quite late, especially when assessments are due.

The Bauwens et al., (2020) study goes on to explain that individuals who capitalise on the flexibility afforded by technology are also those who are able to reduce the demands made on them when facilitating in an online environment and ensure a greater sense of equilibrium in their work-life balance. The central role that technology inevitably plays in an online learning environment was supported by the data in this study and gave rise to the second sub-theme.

7.3 Sub-Theme 2: Technology as Help or Hindrance

Shifting one's facilitation online requires significant changes to one's teaching practice, often demanding “extra planning and effort” (Lucas & Vicente, 2023:5092). Lee and Ogawa (2021) suggest that where an institution has a track record of having promoted the use of teaching technologies, facilitators may develop a level of familiarity that will allow them to adapt to an online learning environment with relative ease. The institution at which this study was conducted implemented a Learning Management System (LMS) in 2014. In the years since, training has been ongoing, focusing on developing blended and online teaching practices. Despite this, the findings in this study still suggest a significant divide between those more efficacious participants who have enthusiastically embraced the use of technology for their online engagement and others who, despite prior exposure to these same technologies, find this requirement intimidating and stressful resulting in what Ventura, Salanova, and Llorens, (2015:280) refer to as a “crisis in efficacy”.

Nelly: I don't mind the discussion board tool, but ... setting up 'auto-graded tasks', there I just get scared that I am going to push the wrong button or create something that doesn't work properly when my students try it, so I just stick to what I know I can do.

Alison: I'm not sure how to use [the tools] properly, to get the most out of them. Obviously, I know the basics; I know how to set up and run a Collab session, I know how to put up additional resources, but I'm not sure how to really leverage the tools as I would like... and I find this incredibly stressful.

While Nelly and Alison share their reticence concerning technology, Paula and Layla appear to have adopted a more intentional approach to adopt the available technologies commensurate with the requirements of online engagement:

Paula: *I love technology, it's always been a passion... I suppose I see technology as a challenge rather than a hardship.*

Layla: *I like to figure out how a tool works and whether it would serve a purpose for me in my module. Same with the internet, I don't let it phase me, I also refused to let it beat me (laughs).*

Whether considered a help or a hindrance, the reality remains that facilitating online requires the use of technologies to support the student learning journey. What became evident during an analysis of the data was that the greatest anxiety and emotional exhaustion was experienced by those participants who had attempted to use the technology to simply replicate their contact classroom practices rather than interrogating how these might need to be adapted for an online setting. This discovery led to the third sub-theme.

7.4 Sub-Theme 3. Adaptation Rather Than Replication

A literature review conducted by Fernández-Batanero, Román-Graván, Reyes-Rebollo, and Montenegro-Rueda (2021) highlighted that facilitators who felt that they had not developed the necessary online pedagogies were likely to feel threatened by the perceived challenges associated with shifting their teaching practice online (Lee and Tsai, 2010). This lack of familiarity can lead to increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and even complete avoidance regarding the use of online teaching technologies (McIlroy and Bunting, 2002). A study by Ma, Chutiya, Zhang, and Nicoll (2021), noted similar findings and explained that when facilitators attempted to use technology to simply replicate their contact teaching practices in the online environment, their levels of anxiety and burnout increased. Similarly, in this study, it was those participants who appeared reluctant, or unable, to make the necessary changes to their practice that experienced heightened levels of emotional exhaustion and a sense of disengagement from their students.

Malcolm: *I didn't really understand how to adapt, or what I needed to adapt, or what 'adapting' actually meant. [So, I] just did things the same way as we did in the classroom, but that obviously wouldn't work... I can see that now, but not [when I started].*

Hannah: *If you want to write out actual formulas and calculations of numbers with a lot of lines, you can't read it on that digital whiteboard. It really doesn't translate well, so ... I tend to avoid it.*

Siva: *Online [students] have no idea who you are, and the truth is they need you to be different online, and I did not see that in the beginning.*

Where participants had understood from the outset that contact teaching practices do not, and, one could perhaps argue, should not directly translate into an online setting, a conscious decision had been made to adapt their approach to one more suited to fully online engagement.

Louise: *I use a mix of audio, visual and written resources and carefully plan these so that it [isn't] too...overwhelming... but rather a complementary combination.*

Tamika: *In online [facilitation], it needs to be far more 'flipped'; students need to get ahead with the content and then use those online sessions to question, consolidate or unpack what they have covered for themselves.*

Paula: *I make a clear distinction between synchronous and asynchronous sessions. I create short pre-recordings that [students] can watch in their own time, and then the [live] sessions are for sharing, talking...explaining concepts and so on.*

During the interviews, the notion of resilience was raised by seven of the ten participants, thus resulting in the final sub-theme.

7.5 Sub-theme 4. Resilience is the key

While participants like Louise, Paula, and Tamika associated their ability to meet the demands of online facilitation with their sense of resilience and a willingness to adapt, others like Nelly and Hannah commented on how they felt that their lack of resilience was a contributing factor to them sometimes feeling overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted by the requirements of the online environment.

Paula: I am quite tough, or should I say resilient, when it comes to challenges that are thrown my way. Changing to online was a big adjustment, but I was excited to take it on.

Louise: Oh, I am definitely resilient. Very little phases me. My life has been about change, so I knew I could take on teaching in a new environment [like online].

Nelly: I can be a bit of a mess when I take on too much at once, and moving my teaching online was a massive step that honestly left me quite shattered most days.

Hannah: I wish I was tougher, more resilient, but the truth is I'm just not. I can become overwhelmed quite quickly, especially when the challenge seems a bit larger than life.

What each of these participants have shared is in keeping with the work of Bonanno (2021:5) who suggest that resilience “is not a simple, one-dimensional construct but, rather, involves multiple interacting components”. To this he adds that certain personality traits or dimensions have been empirically linked to resilience, albeit with modest effects. Traits such as optimism, coping self-efficacy, and being challenge-orientated, can result in the kind of flexible mindset that allows certain individuals to cope with challenges better than others are able to do (*ibid*). Gu and Day (2013), concur, positing that resilience is a complex process that considers a range of personal and contextual factors. It is with this in mind that the following recommendations are made. This means that when institutions look to ways of fostering increased resilience among their facilitators, it is important to understand the process and to recognise that resilience can be used to encourage agency and action, and strengthen resolve (Keogh, Garvis, Pendergast and Diamond, 2012; Nandy, Lodh and Tang, 2021).

8. Recommendations for Institutions

Based on the findings of this study, the following three recommendations are made:

- **1. Academic support**

Institutions are encouraged to proactively establishment of online communities of practice at the beginning of the academic year within the institution's LMS, creating virtual spaces where new and existing facilitators can be directed to connect with peers and to share ideas and resources.

- **2. Peer Support**

Peer support that acts as a buddy-system where support is available for the day-to-day challenges that can present in an online learning context, the sharing of suitable resources, and supporting those individuals less confident in the use of technology to facilitate their practice and encourage a better understanding of what it means to engage with content online.

- **3. Institutional Leadership**

Leadership are encouraged to create at least two 'open mic' type opportunities per semester which allow for more informal engagement between leadership and those tasked with facilitating the institution's qualifications. Establishing this type of forum would serve to minimise the perceived distance between leadership and facilitators, promote greater agency, and allow leadership to gain a richer understanding of the team of facilitators who represent them online and in the classroom.

These recommendations are in keeping with the ideas of Gu and Day (2007) who suggest that by focusing on building and maintaining teacher resilience there will be a direct and positive impact on the quality of teaching as well as the academic achievements of students, while Mullen et al., (2021:14) highlight that an institution that sets high standards, provides clear administrative goals, and allows for “meaningful participation of teachers in decision-making” will create an environment in which teachers can experience a greater sense of agency and purpose leading to increased resilience, improved morale, and reduced susceptibility to burnout.

9. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

This study was positioned within the context of private higher education in South Africa, thus offering a slightly limited, albeit unique, lens through which the constructs of resilience and emotional exhaustion among online facilitators were investigated. Further research that interrogates these same constructs as experienced by online facilitators at public higher education institutions would provide a broader perspective and offer valuable insights into how institutions might mitigate the impact of the day-to-day challenges beyond the scope of a pandemic faced by online facilitators across a range of settings.

While information regarding the age, ethnicity, tenure, and online teaching experience of the participants was gathered using an online survey, for the purpose of this study, this data was not integral to the analysis that was undertaken. Further studies that interrogate whether an online facilitator's level of self-efficacy and emotional exhaustion have any correlation to their age, ethnicity, tenure, and/or teaching experience would add another dimension to understanding these constructs and how institutions might go about developing resilience-focused support strategies that are more closely aligned to the needs of the individual.

Current research suggests that it is not unrealistic to anticipate some form of crisis in the future that would require educational institutions to apply strategies not dissimilar to those implemented in 2020 and 2021 (Desmond-Hellmann, 2020, Hixon, 2020, Nandy, et al., 2021). What is important is that these institutions are better prepared than they have previously been, suggesting a measure of urgency for understanding how to build greater resilience among teaching staff in order to mitigate the onset of emotional exhaustion that can be brought about by stressful situations that might arise, even outside the context of a pandemic (Ross, Scanes and Locke, 2023).

10. Conclusion

A review of the literature cited in this study suggests that while much has been written about the constructs of resilience and emotional exhaustion among teachers in schools, more research is required that interrogates these same phenomena among online facilitators in higher education settings. By engaging with online facilitators working within this context, and hearing their stories regarding the day-to-day challenges associated with this mode of instruction, this study aimed, at least in part, to answer this call. Through these shared insights, much can be learnt about how one's sense of resilience, or perhaps lack thereof, might impact whether burnout is experienced, with particular reference to the domain of emotional exhaustion. The findings gained from these interactions can guide institutions in their plans to proactively support their facilitators in becoming more resilient to the numerous factors at play within a higher education online setting. Resilience, the researchers would argue, should not be a resource limited to a select few, but rather one that every online facilitator has the opportunity to develop.

AI Declaration: The use of AI has not formed any part of this research and/or the drafting of this article.

Ethics Statement: All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of The Independent Institute of Education (R.00084 [REC]).

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