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# Health and wellbeing of the online lecturer: a phenomenological study

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** There is a gap in understanding of how online lecturers experience their health during intense times of online activity such as preparing and giving online feedback/feedforward. **Aims:** This research is designed to explore the experience of online lecturer health and wellbeing considering multiple dimensions of health. It aims to glean rich descriptions of the lived experience of online lecturing. **Methods:** A phenomenological approach was taken, using emergent framework analysis. Ten experienced online lecturers within a Scottish university participated through semi-structured email interviews. **Conclusions:** Findings suggest that online lecturers' health is enhanced by enjoyment of autonomy, freedom, ensuring quality and best practice, enabling engagement with learners and colleagues. However, health is compromised by a mismatch of time allocation and workload, long periods of sitting working intensely through a computer, and a lack of recognition by colleagues, management and faculty.

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## Introduction

Health was defined in 1946 by the World Health Organisation as '... a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 1946, 119). Wellbeing describes someone's perceived quality of life (Thompson and Livingston 2016). According to the World Health Organisation Europe (1986) Health Promotion is 'the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health.'

Online pedagogy is 'a process of shared discovery and collaborative and creative problem solving and innovation', enabled via technology to be universally available (Pavlik 2015, 122). This pedagogy promotes social constructivist learning as lecturers become facilitators, guides and resources, and students take control of their own learning to construct knowledge (Schell and Janicki 2013).

Research into online lecturers' health and wellbeing is not yet well established. Few reports exist regarding lecturers' emotions concerning intense periods of working online, and emotions most commonly found are negative such as anxiety and stress (Rowe,

Fitness, and Wood 2014). This research enhances insights into a number of health dimensions: physical; social; spiritual; mental; emotional; and cognitive. It uncovers challenges to working predominantly online.

Challenges for online lecturers include teaching through the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) with no face-to-face engagement. Time allowance for reading and writing within online discussions is often underestimated and written explanations can take much more time than speech (Emerson 2009). Online lecturers must employ skills innovatively in a range of collaborative practices in order to maintain an environment of positive learner engagement (Joyner et al. 2014; Crews, Wilkinson, and Neill 2015). These skills include: creating a sense of community and belonging; communicating care and sensitivity; and tailoring feedback/feedforward to match learners' needs (Joyner et al. 2014; Rowe, Fitness, and Wood 2014). Along with supporting learners socially, the online lecturer must create a 'community of inquiry', the 'integration of cognitive, social and teaching presence' (Garrison and Cleveland-Innes 2005, 134). They must provide positive, high quality feedback; feedforward offering clear guidance for development (Joyner et al. 2014); facilitation of discussions, enhancing motivation and fostering encouragement (Crews, Wilkinson, and Neill 2015). This can bring exciting challenges, learning opportunities and responsibilities, but learning new technologies and how to interact through them can cause 'oppressive pressure' (Hung and Chou 2015, 315) whilst concurrently mentoring and supporting students and lecturers new to the online environment (Baran and Correia 2014).

Barkhuizen, Rothmann, and van de Vijver (2014, 323) recognised that academic staff were more likely to become disengaged when overloaded as exhaustion can lead to a distancing of 'themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work and to become less responsive to the needs of other people or the demands of the task'. This situation can lead to burnout, having a "devastating impact on the health and well-being of academics (Barkhuizen, Rothmann, and van de Vijver 2014, 330). In discussing the bombardment by learners pursuing online help at any time, Rose and Adams (2014, 8–9) considered that 'such instantaneous availability disburdens the consumer ... of the real effort previously required' to contact a lecturer for assistance. This disburdening of the learner, then has the potential to overburden the lecturer, potentially leading to a collapse of the ethos of online pedagogy if the lecturer then becomes overwhelmed, disengaged, and no longer able to enjoy teaching presence.

Recognition of the online learning environment by other faculty members is important: 'when faculty members see online learning as academically respected and recognised within their college or university, they are more confident and motivated to teach online and create high-quality courses' (Baran and Correia 2014, 100). However, Thompson and Livingston (2016) note that a sense of being unappreciated whilst already under stress can be challenging, and lead to sub-optimal performance, increasing errors, and rate of absence.

## Literature review

A review of subject-related published literature was undertaken using the phrase 'online lecturer wellbeing' looking for articles written in English, within peer-reviewed journals and texts, with publication dates within the past 5 years. None uncovered were

specifically related to the subject of lecturer wellbeing, other than emotional wellbeing. Interchanging words lecturer/tutor and health/wellbeing brought forth no further specifically relevant findings. Findings are presented under main themes identified by the researcher: academic recognition; emotional wellbeing, ethical tensions, and reflective practice.

### **Academic recognition**

Thoits (2010) looked at the impact of sociological stressors on health and health inequality raising important issues involved in the need to buffer stress: a high level of self-esteem; a sense of mastery and control over circumstances; and having or perceiving, a sense of being valued and supported. In light of this, the matter of whether or not online learning and teaching is respected by colleagues and other faculty members holds important relevance. Harper and Nicolson (2013, 267) found that self-motivation, recognising the need for development, was a powerful factor: more so than an 'externally diagnosed requirement'. Positive academic recognition seemed to go some way to reassuring participants and empowering them to overcome fears regarding technology, adapting pedagogy, and increasing a sense of regaining control (Harper and Nicolson 2013); therefore alleviating stress.

### **Emotional wellbeing**

Berry and Cassidy (2013, 23) discussed the issues surrounding emotional labour: the 'state that exists when there is a discrepancy between the emotional demeanour that an individual displays and the genuinely felt emotions that would be inappropriate to display'. They warn that high emotional labour in lecturers can be a risk to the university as a whole by affecting overall performance, potential commercial risk: and be a predictor of poor learner satisfaction, performance and retention (Berry and Cassidy 2013). Bennett (2014) found that some lecturers experienced a sense of being ridiculed and laughed at by colleagues when their use of new technologies were problematic. This conflict arose when opinions regarding the traditional and online culture clashed causing 'high emotional burden for lecturers' (Bennett 2014, 928). Working through technology was deemed as outside of tradition and some colleagues were not only unsupportive, but 'disparaging' and 'dismissive' (Bennett 2014, 925). Baran and Correia (2014, 97) describe a real sense of 'transition' to online teaching, with lecturers having to undergo a reconstruction of their concepts and attitudes as they embark on coming to terms with new skills and a new role.

Lecturers in Bennett's (2014) study felt unprepared and inadequate for the added burdens of the online environment. Data found was mostly negative, and it was felt that to work effectively online, a strong commitment was essential (Bennett 2014). Conrad (2004) emphasises the importance of self-awareness and the ability of lecturers to bring themselves into their teaching. It could be argued that this passion for teaching could be easier within a face-to-face environment where the teacher can be visually expressive. However, when a lecturer is at peace with the online environment, having grasped how to manage the technology, course building and administrative responsibilities, and enabled all learners to feel they belong to the online community (Boling et al. 2012), then this

move towards increasing mastery could enhance their sense of health and wellbeing (Thoits 2010). It would be ‘at their peril’ for employers to fail to recognise the demands of workload (Thompson and Livingston 2016, 5).

### **Ethical tensions**

Rose and Adams (2014, 5) found that ethical tensions were experienced by online lecturers who found themselves overwhelmingly bombarded with being ‘increasingly on call’. The importance of creating an ethos of care, communication, respect, security and compassion (Rowe, Fitness, and Wood 2014) can leave lecturers overburdened and exhausted. The asynchronous nature of online interaction may tempt the lecturer to mismanage this by feigning absence, inflaming the tension between learner-first and lecturer-first decisions, and increasing the burden of unfulfilled expectations (Rose and Adams 2014).

### **Reflective practice**

A degree of relief from this anxiety may come through the practice of reflection. Where this is systematic, conscious, and discussed within the shared professional dialogue, lecturers may more easily learn the art of online pedagogy (LaPrade, Gilpatrick, and Perkins 2014). Any type of leadership role must have a ‘good measure of self-esteem and confidence’ and the practitioner must be ‘willing to listen to other points of view’ (Geneen 1988, 131). Lecturers are leaders, but also learners (Baran, Correia, and Thompson 2011) and they themselves need feedback/feedforward as there can be areas of significant mismatch between what learners and lecturers perceive is of value (Beaumont, O’Doherty, and Shannon 2011).

Perhaps not all lecturers are suited to the online pedagogical environment. There may be a sense of solitude, of not connecting, and of merely ‘performing’ with no perception of really ‘sharing that space’ with learners (Rose and Adams 2014, 11). Such experiences may demonstrate the importance of reaching self-awareness through self-evaluation and appraisal, bringing a more positive outlook on health and wellbeing through an ease of tensions (Rose and Adams 2014).

### **Methodology**

To gain an understanding of the lived experiences of lecturers within the online pedagogical environment, a qualitative study was undertaken. A constructivist worldview was deemed most appropriate as the data anticipated would be representative of the online environment that was experienced daily by the participants (Creswell 2014). The goal was to glean an understanding of lecturers’ views and to construct the meaning of this virtual online teaching and learning space through their stories, attitudes and insights (Creswell 2014). Lecturer participants, therefore, became the social actors, and their ‘own subjective interpretation’ (Smyth et al. 2016, 10) would tell the story of how their experiences were lived out and constructed.

The most appropriate approach was that of phenomenology. The aim was to seek, and bring together, a rich description of the ‘essences of the experiences’ (Creswell 2014, 14)

of lecturers about the phenomenon, within the online pedagogical environment, of how giving feedback and feedforward had impacted on lecturers' health and wellbeing. This, though considered a 'complex approach to research' (Smyth et al. 2016, 14), was nevertheless the best suited. This inductive strategy would seek to answer 'what' the impact was, rather than 'why' any impact had occurred (Blaikie 2010, 18–19). 'Phenomenology contributes to deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for-granted assumptions about these ways of knowing' (Starks and Trinidad 2007, 1373); therefore understanding more fully the real perceptions of online lecturers, would reveal any wrong assumptions or ideas.

An important factor with phenomenological studies is that of the researcher's own experiences, and the need to ensure these do not overly influence the interpretation of the data gathered (Smyth et al. 2016). Bracketing off these experiences will help to ensure that this approach is not influenced by contamination through the researcher's own experience as an online lecturer, and the researcher becomes responsible to maintain a 'conscious ignorance' throughout the project (Chan, Fung, and Chien 2013, 4). It is not only the data collection and analysis which can be potentially influenced by the researcher's experience: the literature review itself can guide expectations and may require to be limited at the outset, so as not to colour the view (Chan, Fung, and Chien 2013). The literature available for review in this study found that the majority of research findings examined seemed to discover issues which predominantly impacted negatively on health and wellbeing. This could indeed colour expectations, but bracketing off the tone of the literature review findings, also assisted in protecting the project from bias.

Prior to commencing this research project, the researcher reflected on personal ideas and assumptions regarding the phenomena under exploration. A reflexive diary was commenced and maintained, and ideas and assumptions were bracketed off from the project. It is inevitable, however, that the production of data in qualitative research will involve the researcher as the producer (Green and Thorogood 2009), but care was taken not to influence responses, and not to lead their direction. Rather than considering the researcher's own experience as potentially contaminating, a positive stance was taken acknowledging that the insider position had identified insight into the need for the research, and that there could be heightened trust in that the researcher would be 'sensitive to the issue and ... likely to temper' the 'arguments accordingly' (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 662). Having an insider position can also facilitate the creation of insightful interview questions, though care was taken to balance insights in order to reduce the risk of bias (Salmons 2012).

This project enabled the researcher to prepare and develop interview questions, and to prompt responses, while withholding any active input of the researcher's perspectives. Within this project the researcher did not become a co-participant, but sought to interpret responses carefully in order to pursue relevant avenues of further inquiry. The suggestion of rapport being damaged by the bracketing of the researcher's experiences (Lowes and Prowse 2001) was not evident within this project. Rapport is an essential component in any qualitative interview and establishing a shared identity with participants at the outset can help to establish trust (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez 2015). Such self-disclosure was shared within the letter of introduction sent to all participants at the outset of the project. The researcher was positioned as a fellow online lecturer, engaged in learning the role of experienced practitioners.

Ten experienced online module leaders within a Scottish university, were invited via email to participate. This sample was cross faculty, and a credible representation (Green and Thorogood 2009) as these participants all live the experience of online pedagogy, and are a purposive sample; their views and experiences form the 'facts' of this enquiry (Goulding 2005, 302).

Ethical approval was granted by the UHI Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC), and voluntary informed consent was received. This researcher is also governed by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC 2015) and all parts of the NMC Code of Professional Standards were upheld.

Semi-structured email interviews were chosen based on a number of advantages including: reduced cost in terms of time and travel; no need for transcription; easy secure storage of data; asynchronous; and because participants are fluent in their use. Interviews were semi-structured so that a basis of questions was established, but participants had the opportunity to develop themes and elaborate wherever their thinking took them. These open-ended questions also gave the researcher freedom to ask for clarity and to probe a response more deeply (Chan, Fung, and Chien 2013). Flexibility was a key factor in this type of interview schedule, as it allowed for the investigation of other avenues not already covered by the question topics (Smyth et al. 2016). The importance of listening should not be underestimated as this skill within email correspondence is essential so that understanding is maximised (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez 2015). Clarifying interpretation and reflecting back perceived meanings are important factors when engaging in dialogue (Bowden and Galindo-Gonzalez 2015), and ensured accurate accounts of participant experiences.

A small pilot study was undertaken utilising a convenience sample (Green and Thorogood 2009), enabling testing of any ambiguity of written questions as well as illuminating the potential of gleaning possible information and receiving valuable feedback (Rennie and Smyth 2016).

Interview questions were arranged in three small clusters which were sent at intervals of approximately 2 weeks. Participants were asked to respond to each question in sequence and email their responses back. This sequence of continuous emails for each participant kept all their data together. Data were transferred from email to secure, anonymised documents where margins were prepared giving space for coding and comments for analysis (Gale et al. 2013). Dates were recorded in the research diary of participant responses and the date of sending of each cluster. All entries to the reflexive diary were recorded so that notes could be correlated with other data throughout the project.

## Research questions

### *First cluster*

What was it that originally attracted you to be involved with online teaching and assessment? Please explore your answer here.

What aspects of online teaching and assessment have you most enjoyed, and least enjoyed, and why?

How have your initial expectations of online teaching and assessment matched up to your experience so far?

## **Second cluster**

In relation to giving online feedback/feedforward, please share your perceptions of how online students use this?

Do you think the effort you put into online feedback/feedforward matches your expectations of student engagement with what you have given?

What are the best ways to measure the success of your feedback/feedforward?

## **Third cluster**

Please outline the ways that preparing and giving feedback/feedforward online have impacted on your own health and wellbeing? Please explore your reasoning here.

On reflection of your own experience, what advice and health-promoting tips could you pass on to a new Module Leader?

## **Data collection & analysis**

An emergent framework analysis approach was used to code and theme data. Eight participants completed responses to all clusters of questions. Two participants stalled due to heavy workload; and could not continue beyond the first and second cluster. The data gathered from these participants was included within the analysis and results. Though the sample seemed small, there was rich depth in all responses.

Open coding allowed for unexpected data to be noted and coded within the framework under 'other' as anomalies are important to strengthen analysis (Gale et al. 2013) and to increase trustworthiness (Elo et al. 2014). The data transcripts were read line by line in order to apply labels or codes to any information that could be relevant. These codes were then systematically compared with others found from each transcript. (Gale et al. 2013; Elo et al. 2014). A tree diagram was used along with sticky notes to form clusters of initial codes enabling categories to emerge so that textual codes could be indexed. These categories were then formed into columns and headed with wording which most suitably described what they represented. This visual display assisted with continued reflection and interpretation; impressions of the data were recorded in the reflexive diary (Gale et al. 2013; Creswell 2014). This process was repeated for each cluster until there were no new themes or categories.

## **Findings**

The use of original data in the form of participants' quotations has enriched the descriptions of findings. All participants have been quoted, and quotations are identified by the use of italics and participant's identification number (*1–10*).

The challenges of online teaching perceived by participants spanned across a number of health dimensions. Those dimensions identified form the subheadings: physical; social, spiritual, mental and emotional, and cognitive health and are followed by participants' health-promoting advice.



## Physical

The main positive impact was that even when lecturers were not entirely well, online work could continue from home thus providing continuity for learners and a reduced backlog of waiting workload. However, importantly, working from home tended not to provide a formally risk assessed work station and this could have added ergonomic implications. *'The importance of ergonomics became known when it became a health and safety issue'* (1) Physical issues had substantial implications:

- *Back ache* (1, 2)
- *Shoulder & neck pain* (2)
- *Damaged posture* (1, 2, 7)
- *Being physically unfit* (8)
- *Eye strain and headaches* (1)
- *Skin problems* (7)
- *Sleep problems* (5, 7)

*"Spending long times at the computer has given me backache and shoulder pain which I have never experienced"*. (2)

Changes in weight were another burden and contributing factors included; lack of time to move about and to cook and eat nutritious meals; eating quickly; eating processed meals; and becoming desk-based for what seemed to need to be unending time.

*"Since working like this I have noticed I have put on weight and feel more tired"* (2)

Exhaustion was a major concern. Increasing tiredness led to frequent insomnia and lowered immunity and extended recovery from illnesses.

*"Conditions are not amenable to quality feedback/feedforward and health and wellbeing"*. (8)

*"The module leader does not have any control over working conditions of the teaching team and cannot influence the time allocated to online work"*. (1)

*"I think expectations of giving high quality feedback within a short space of time is not actually realistic"*. (10)

## Social

Team work was particularly enjoyed, but lack of time inhibited this. Communication with learners and the development of meaningful discussions in the learning environment held positive benefits for lecturers. Friendships and supportive networks amongst colleagues were developed. Overwhelmingly however, lecturers experienced negative impacts on their social lives with workload creeping into the evenings and weekends, and at times taking over until weekends seemed to disappear. There was a sense of guilt at having to explain absence from family outings and from letting down friends. Very early morning starts were attempted in order to rescue time in the day, but the sheer workload

meant that family members were also stressed. It was felt that ‘*inordinate amounts of time*’ (7) were needed just to get through.

*“There is a danger that online work can take over your life.”* (3).

## Spiritual

The idea of balance began to emerge in themes which described what was enjoyed and what was burdensome.

Autonomy and flexibility were considered both enjoyable and attractive. There was a feeling of needing to do things well, a desire to formulate feedback/feedforward that would be heard and engaged with. There was a passion for the fundamental nature of empowering learners to learn; an interest in the development of quality in both materials and teaching presence.

*“This style of teaching suits me, it allows me to engage with a lot of different activities so it works for my need for variety and it is very satisfying when it can be done well”.*(1)

However, there was recognition of not enough time to reach a place where the workload was satisfied. The periods of constant marking could be soul-destroying, and attempting to meet the needs of learners became increasingly difficult as workload built up proving disheartening and bringing a feeling of not meeting own expectations of self.

*“Quite honestly, I did not realise the great amount of time required when teaching online”.* (2)  
*“I feel I don’t have time to take care of myself”*(7); *“management don’t seem to ‘see’/act”.* (4)

*“At times, I feel that the workload is unmanageable and that it is impossible to be completed within a normal working day or week”.* (5)

*“The least enjoyable ... too much work, unable to give it the attention it needs/deserves”.* (6)

## Mental and emotional

Desire to engage with learners and meet their needs were predominantly believed to be essential, and effort was therefore afforded but brought at times, high levels of stress. With no downtime, and lack of sleep, stress became extreme. Unrealistic expectations of high-quality work were impossible to match, causing sadness.

*“I do not usually suffer from lack of confidence however to continually work in this way leads you to feel that you are not good enough for the job – when in actual fact I know this is not the case”.*(9)

Worrying about getting through the work in time was extremely stressful and lecturers had to manage a trade-off between different essential items: for example; neglecting the development of materials because there was so much marking; and attempting to give quality individualised feedback/feedforward when there was no time left.

*“In order to provide the best service to the student the extended time that is required is being completed out with usual business working hours. This has not only an impact on my health*

*and wellbeing in terms of exhaustion but also leads to feelings of guilt for not spending time with my family”. (9)*

*“I do not manage to have time to myself during evenings and weekends. I believe that this has a negative impact including feeling guilty about postponing social activities with my friends”. (5)*

## Cognitive

Being mindful of the learner, trying hard to give helpful, positive feedback/feedforward were high priorities, but efforts could be frustrated through poor sleep leading to reduced concentration. Trying to take care with wording and to ensure a balance of positive and negative points was difficult in the time given and with tiredness ensuing. Returning to work on a Monday could be a struggle when the weekend had been consumed with marking and an attempt to prepare for teaching.

*“I have not had time to rest and relax. This has made me prone to illness and has a negative impact on my sleeping pattern” (5).*

*“Marking madness – this is the feeling that takes over my life when I begin the feedback/feedforward process – it takes over my personal and working life – weekends disappear”(7).*

*“I think that the only way that I manage is because I am part time”. (3)*

Noise in the office space created tension, though rarely made obvious. The emotional labour of remaining calm while cognitively irritated had to be achieved on a professional basis. Some felt they had had enough, and were disillusioned with the online environment and overwhelming workload.

## Health-promoting advice

Health benefits were found in the enjoyment: *‘... the teamwork with other online lecturers, the communication (and the relationships) that I could develop with students’. (1) ‘I do like the flexibility of working online’. (10) I enjoy the development of course materials and considering the way in which these work pedagogically”(8).* These issues, as well as the excitement of new challenges, brought satisfaction and could enhance a sense of wellbeing.

Further advice for the promotion of physical health included:

- *Get plenty fresh air (2, 7)*
- *Drink plenty water (7)*
- *Move regularly and ensure breaks (2, 7)*
- *Try to be realistic and set out a plan for breaks, and stick to it (4)*
- *Prepare healthy meals in advance of heavy marking periods (7)*
- *Request workspace assessment (1)*
- *If at all possible, restrict the online work (3)*

The need for mutual support was highlighted recognising that online teaching can be isolating, both socially and intellectually. This support not only reduces isolation, but can encourage continual dialogue where ideas can be swapped, and stressors discussed.

Switching off from learners, and walking away from the computer were considered vital. Taking careful heed of, but not absorbing, negativity from learners' survey responses could aid reflection; though it was essential not to 'let the comments from a few get to you personally'. (5)

*"I think that as academic staff we need to be supportive of each other and set clear boundaries for our working patterns". (9)*

Advice was also offered not to get stressed over workload; *'though this was hypocritical'*. (5) Further workload advice included:

- *Be very organised (2)*
- *Keep on track (2)*
- *Consider deadlines carefully (1)*
- *Ensure enough time between assessments to give feedback/feedforward (1)*
- *Avoid going overboard with feedback/feedforward (4)*
- *Listen to the guidance from the External Examiner (4)*
- *Flag-up all challenges to management; at every opportunity (1)*
- *Have clear boundaries for learners so they know what to expect (3, 7, 9)*
- *Don't do any 'proper' work over weekends (10)*

The issues of too much online marking were considered as needing to be avoided. *'All online is very isolating'*. *'Think about what you could do to make life easier'*. (4)

*"Ensure time out (though workload prevents relaxing and enjoying time out)" (2), "Be proactive not reactive in your planning for marking". (7)*

*"The module leader should flag up the challenges of online teaching to management ... with particular attention to the need for a suitable workstation, and training to use it properly ..."(1)*

*"Time allocation should be raised again and again, until it is satisfactory and acknowledges the demands of effective online teaching". (1)*

It is important to note that the overall issues were not the actual online work, but the time allowance to enable quality, and pressure reduced to a sustainable level.

## Discussion

It is well known that poor nutrition and lack of physical activity are damaging to health, and can predispose to non-communicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease and increased likelihood of cerebrovascular accident (Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland 2017). Perhaps these issues need greater recognition as the subtle health dangers, which go unaddressed, in the health of the online lecturer. Likewise, home workstations may fall short of the employer controlled situation governed by The 'Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974' (Act of Parliament 1974), and be detrimental to posture.

Insomnia can have a negative impact on both psychological and physiological health (Lee et al. 2014). Furthermore, exposure to bright light, such as a computer screen, prior to attempting sleep is 'positively associated with insomnia' and difficulty in dropping off

to sleep (Fossum et al. (2014, 344). This inhibition of sleep denies the individual the ability to ‘maintain a more relaxed and focused state’ during the working day (Lee et al. 2014, 1657). Thompson and Livingston (2016) report that overwork can have serious consequences on health; in turn affecting colleagues, learners, the wider institution, as well as the individual, family, and friends. ‘If people do not have a sufficient break from their pressures, then the results can be quite catastrophic in terms of stress and burnout and the wider consequences of such problems’ (Thompson and Livingston 2016, 5).

Extended recovery from minor illnesses indicated that lecturers were often working under par and their work/life situation was out of balance. Spiritual health can be defined as the ‘search for meaning and purpose in human existence, leading one to strive for a state of harmony with oneself and others while working to balance inner needs with the rest of the world’ (University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences: College of Medicine n.d.).

It is important however to recognise health benefits, as this recognition can aid in perseverance and encouragement when there are other challenges to overcome (Scriven 2010). According to Barkhuizen, Rothmann, and van de Vijver (2014) increasing resources, including time allocation, can increase health and wellbeing, which in turn will increase engagement of both lecturers and their learners. It may be that the issue of time allocation is one of the main concerns within online feedback/feedforward, and this can only be realistically addressed if there is indeed recognition of workload; and where lecturers no longer feel they need to justify their online role.

Kenny and Fluck (2014, 601) suggest that there is an important gap in understanding the connection between the ‘manageability of academic work, the quality of teaching, and research outcomes’; and this needs further research. The reputation of the university and the welfare of its staff and learners, can be substantially affected by high-stress levels, ‘work overload, poor leadership, and lack of reward and recognition’ (Kenny and Fluck 2014, 586).

## Conclusions and recommendations

This research has reported the perceptions of experienced online lecturers and the impact on their health and wellbeing of working online. The main emphasis found was that of lack of time allocated to workload, and the stressors which then developed. Participants were committed and diligent, and experts in online pedagogy. They enjoyed the autonomy and freedom of the online environment but they needed to be permitted and supported to do what they were employed to do, and maintain a passion for learner welfare, success and empowerment.

Further research involving real-time estimations of dealing with these demands, might elicit data to help explain the overwhelming situations that online lecturers are at times experiencing. Faculty and management might benefit overall from such an undertaking, as support for staff is paramount in maintaining learner success and university reputation. Using these findings could enable collaboration with online lecturers to initiate health promotion policy and initiatives. It may be pertinent also, in relieving longer-term stressors, to research the impact on new lecturers of being concurrently introduced to both face-to-face and online learning and teaching, as this may lighten the burden of

transition. Personal suitability of a lecturer to the online environment needs consideration alongside timetabling.

The longer-term effects on health and wellbeing might not yet be obvious in the online lecturer environment, yet non-communicable diseases are invading the sedentary lifestyle. Enabling online lecturers to have increased control over their work environment and timetabling may benefit health and wellbeing, and mitigate against this unhealthy lifestyle.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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