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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pedagogical Disruption and Lecturer Preparedness During Emergency Online Teaching: Evidence from Sri Lankan Higher Education

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Abstract

The sudden transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic placed unprecedented demands on university lecturers, particularly within resource-constrained higher education systems. While early scholarship has documented broad challenges associated with emergency remote teaching, less attention has been paid to how lecturers in developing contexts experienced pedagogical disruption and professional strain during this period. This paper examines lecturer preparedness, instructional adaptation, and professional wellbeing during the rapid shift to online teaching in Sri Lankan higher education. Drawing on qualitative evidence from an exploratory study conducted during the pandemic, the paper synthesises lecturer-reported challenges relating to digital competence, instructional design, workload escalation, infrastructure limitations, and emotional pressure. The analysis situates these experiences within wider debates on pedagogical resilience and academic labour under crisis conditions. Rather than framing lecturers as passive recipients of institutional directives, the paper highlights the active but constrained role academics played in sustaining teaching continuity despite limited systemic support. The findings contribute to international discussions on emergency online pedagogy by foregrounding the lived realities of lecturers operating within fragile digital ecosystems. The paper concludes with reflections on what lecturer experiences during COVID-19 reveal about preparedness, support, and professional sustainability in higher education systems facing future disruptions.

K E Y WO R D S

Emergency remote teaching, lecturer preparedness, online pedagogy, COVID-19, higher education, Sri Lank

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated one of the most rapid and far-reaching disruptions to higher education in modern history. Universities across the world were compelled to close campuses almost overnight, suspending face-to-face teaching and adopting online modes of delivery with minimal warning or preparation. Although digital learning had been gaining ground for several years, the sudden and universal nature of this transition created conditions that differed markedly from planned online or blended learning initiatives. Hodges et al. (2020) characterised this shift as emergency remote teaching rather than intentional online education, a distinction that has become central to understanding the pedagogical, organisational, and professional challenges that followed.

Responses to this abrupt transformation were uneven across contexts. In some settings, students reported positive attitudes towards online learning and expressed satisfaction with its flexibility and continuity during lockdowns (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). In other contexts, however, a majority of students continued to prefer in-person classes, citing reduced engagement, learning fatigue, and difficulties with access (Nishimwe et al., 2022). These contrasting experiences reinforce earlier arguments that the educational value of technology is neither uniform nor self-evident, but contingent on how, where, and for whom it is applied (Kirkwood & Price, 2013). For students, the pandemic also appeared to widen existing educational inequalities, contributing to learning loss, heightened anxiety, and disproportionate burdens on those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Bassleer et al., 2025). Public discourse reflected similar concerns, with analysis of social media data showing that anxieties extended beyond teaching delivery to encompass assessment practices and academic evaluation, which became increasingly prominent as the pandemic progressed (Jamalian et al., 2023).

For academic staff, the transition represented far more than a change in delivery mode. It entailed a profound disruption to established pedagogical practices, professional identities, and everyday working conditions. Lecturers were required to redesign courses at speed, master unfamiliar digital platforms, and sustain student engagement within fully remote environments, often while managing personal uncertainty,

domestic responsibilities, and concerns around health and job security. These pressures underscored the qualitative difference between emergency remote teaching and carefully designed online education, a distinction repeatedly emphasised in the literature (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Within developing higher education systems, these challenges were intensified by longstanding infrastructural and resource constraints. The pandemic constituted another critical test of the Sri Lankan government's commitment to higher education as a public good and fundamental right (Perera, 2017). Sri Lankan universities, like many institutions across the Global South, entered the pandemic with uneven access to digital technologies, limited staff training in online pedagogy, and pronounced disparities in institutional capacity. Reports from the Asian Development Bank noted that although Sri Lanka achieved a rapid transition to online learning, persistent issues such as unreliable internet connectivity, high data costs, limited access to devices, and inconsistent institutional support continued to undermine both teaching and learning (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

The effects of this sudden digital migration were experienced across multiple levels. Muller et al. (2023) observed that the pandemic generated short-term and long-term consequences at the individual level for lecturers, administrators, and students, as well as at team and institutional levels. Limited bandwidth, reliance on mobile devices, and uneven technical support shaped how lecturers engaged with online teaching, often requiring them to draw on personal resources, informal peer networks, and improvised strategies to sustain educational provision (Thenuwara et al., 2023). Studies conducted during the pandemic in Sri Lanka highlighted widespread concerns among academic staff regarding inadequate institutional support, restricted access to training, and the pressure to maintain academic standards despite significant technological and infrastructural barriers (Hayashi et al., 2020; Wijewardene, 2022).

Digital education emerged as an apparent and, in many cases, the only viable solution to educational disruption during lockdowns. Yet an uncritical embrace of technology risked generating new challenges that threatened the foundational goals of education. Scholars have cautioned that technological adoption must be sensitive to context, recognising the social dimensions of learning and the dynamics of policy, power, and equity within educational institutions and the societies in which they operate (Farag et al., 2022). Evidence also suggests that lecturers require additional support when transitioning to remote teaching, particularly in crisis contexts where time, training, and resources are constrained (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Broader institutional planning is therefore essential to mitigate the disruptive effects of emergency online migration on academic cycles, recruitment processes, and the wider ecology of university education (Watermeyer et al., 2021).

The broader research project underpinning this paper examined the impact of COVID-19 on online teaching and learning within Sri Lankan higher education, drawing on the experiences of both lecturers and students. This paper concentrates specifically on the lecturer dimension, addressing a persistent gap in the literature concerning how academic staff navigated emergency online teaching under constrained and uneven conditions. Much of the early pandemic literature tended to treat lecturers as a relatively homogenous group, often overlooking the contextual factors that shape preparedness, confidence, and capacity to adapt (Buvanendra & Senathiraja, 2022). A more context-sensitive account is therefore required to understand academic work during periods of crisis-driven educational transformation.

Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of online teaching outcomes, this paper critically examines the conditions under which lecturers were expected to deliver education during the pandemic. The analysis explores how limited digital skills, inadequate institutional support, and infrastructural weaknesses intersected with emotional and professional strain. This approach recognises that academic labour in times of crisis is shaped by the interaction between structural constraints and individual agency. Developing a grounded understanding of these dynamics is essential for informing more resilient and equitable approaches to digital education. The Sri Lankan experience offers insights of relevance to other developing higher education systems seeking to strengthen digital infrastructure, enhance staff development, and support academic wellbeing in times of crisis and beyond.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emergency Remote Teaching and Pedagogical Disruption

Emergency remote teaching refers to the temporary shift of instructional delivery to online modes in response to crisis conditions (Hodges et al., 2020). Unlike established forms of online education, which rely on intentional pedagogical design and structured planning, emergency remote teaching prioritises continuity of instruction rather than optimisation of learning environments. Studies conducted during the pandemic consistently show that lecturers experienced substantial disruption to teaching routines, assessment practices, and their usual modes of interaction with students (Watermeyer et al., 2021). These disruptions were not only technical but also pedagogical, as academics were required to rethink how learning could be facilitated in unfamiliar digital spaces.

Pedagogical disruption becomes particularly acute when lecturers have limited prior experience with digital platforms or online instructional design. Research indicates that rapid transitions of this nature can undermine teaching confidence and increase cognitive load, especially when training opportunities and technical support are insufficient (Trust & Whalen, 2020). These challenges are further intensified in contexts where digital infrastructure is unreliable or unevenly distributed, creating additional barriers to effective teaching and learning.

2.2 Lecturer Preparedness and Digital Competence

Lecturer preparedness for online teaching encompasses a combination of technical skills, pedagogical knowledge, and

institutional support structures. Prior to the pandemic, studies highlighted the importance of sustained professional development in digital pedagogy and the need for institutions to invest in staff capability building (Kirkwood & Price, 2014). During COVID-19, however, opportunities for systematic training were often limited or entirely absent. Many lecturers were left to rely on self-directed learning, informal peer support, and trial-and-error approaches to navigate new digital environments.

In developing higher education systems, lecturer preparedness is shaped by broader structural inequalities. Limited access to hardware, unstable internet connectivity, and inadequate learning management systems have been widely identified as barriers to effective online teaching in South Asian contexts (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). These constraints affect not only the quality of teaching but also lecturer morale and wellbeing, as staff are required to meet heightened expectations while working with insufficient resources.

2.3 Academic Labour and Emotional Strain

The pandemic amplified existing pressures within academic labour. Lecturers faced increased workloads, blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, and heightened expectations to sustain student engagement under challenging circumstances (Hofer et al., 2021; Salas-Pilco et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Emotional strain emerged as a recurring theme across pandemic-era studies, with academics reporting stress, anxiety, and exhaustion linked to both pedagogical demands and wider societal uncertainty. The shift to online teaching often required lecturers to be constantly available, respond to student concerns beyond traditional working hours, and manage their own personal responsibilities while maintaining professional performance.

Although much of the early literature focused on student wellbeing, lecturer mental health has received comparatively less attention. This paper addresses that imbalance by foregrounding the emotional dimensions of emergency online teaching within the Sri Lankan context, highlighting how structural constraints, pedagogical disruption, and heightened expectations collectively shaped the lived experiences of academic staff.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative data generated through an exploratory study that examined online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lankan higher education. A qualitative orientation was selected because it enables a detailed and contextually grounded understanding of how individuals interpret and respond to complex, rapidly evolving situations. Qualitative approaches are particularly valuable when the aim is to capture lived experience, emotional labour, and the interplay between structural constraints and personal agency (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews formed the primary method of data collection. This format offered a balance between consistency across participants and the flexibility to explore emerging issues in depth. Semi-structured interviewing is widely recognised as an effective approach for exploratory research, especially when investigating experiences that are varied, sensitive, or shaped by institutional context (Kallio et al., 2016). Participants were recruited from a range of Sri Lankan universities to reflect diversity in institutional capacity, disciplinary background, and teaching experience. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were conducted online due to pandemic restrictions and typically lasted between forty and sixty minutes.

The analysis presented in this paper focuses exclusively on lecturer-centred findings documented in the original research. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the interview data. This approach followed the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), involving an iterative process of familiarisation, coding, categorisation, and theme development. Initial codes were generated inductively to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than shaped by predefined assumptions. These codes were then refined into broader themes relating to preparedness, pedagogical adaptation, institutional support, and professional strain. Attention was paid to both shared experiences and points of divergence, recognising that lecturers' responses were shaped by differences in digital competence, institutional resources, and personal circumstances.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Reflexive memo-writing was used throughout the coding process to document analytic decisions and reflect on potential researcher assumptions. This aligns with recommendations for strengthening credibility and transparency in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure they accurately represented participants' accounts, and contrasting cases were examined to avoid overgeneralisation. Although the study does not claim statistical generalisability, it offers analytical insights that may be transferable to other higher education contexts characterised by resource constraints and uneven digital readiness.

4. Findings

Four interconnected themes emerged: digital skills and pedagogical adaptation, infrastructure and resource constraints, workload and professional pressure, and emotional and psychological impact. These themes reflect both shared experiences and individual variations shaped by institutional context, personal circumstances, and differing levels of digital readiness.

4.1 Digital Skills and Pedagogical Adaptation

Lecturers entered the pandemic with uneven levels of digital competence. Several participants described only basic familiarity with virtual learning environments,

video-conferencing tools, or online assessment systems. The abrupt shift to online teaching required rapid skill development, often without structured training or institutional guidance. Many lecturers reported learning through experimentation, informal peer support, and publicly available tutorials.

These experiences echo wider international findings that academics were compelled to develop digital skills at speed, often under considerable pressure and with limited preparation (Cutri et al., 2020). Participants described challenges in redesigning lectures for online delivery, creating asynchronous materials, and sustaining student engagement in virtual classrooms. Activities that worked effectively in face-to-face settings did not always translate well online, prompting lecturers to rethink pacing, clarity, and interaction. Similar patterns have been observed in other low- and middle-income contexts, where lecturers struggled to balance content delivery with meaningful engagement during emergency remote teaching (Khlaif et al., 2021; Tulaskar & Turunen, 2022; Kaeane & Molokomme, 2025).

Despite these difficulties, lecturers demonstrated adaptability. Some experimented with shorter lecture formats, interactive tools, or more structured guidance for students. Others reported becoming more reflective about their teaching, recognising the need to simplify content and provide clearer scaffolding. These adaptations highlight the agency and resilience of academic staff working under constrained conditions.

4.2 Infrastructure and Resource Constraints

Infrastructural limitations emerged as a pervasive challenge. Many lecturers reported unstable internet connections, frequent power interruptions, and limited access to suitable devices. These issues disrupted live teaching sessions, delayed the uploading of materials, and increased preparation time. Participants described having to repeat lectures due to connectivity failures or resorting to audio-only sessions to conserve bandwidth.

These findings align with broader analyses of digital inequality in South Asia, where infrastructural gaps have been identified as a major barrier to effective online education (Khashunika et al., 2021; Iacovidou & Sharma, 2022; Mathrani et al., 2022). Several lecturers noted that institutional learning management systems were outdated or unable to cope with increased demand. Others reported minimal institutional support, with some universities providing data packages or platform access while others offered little assistance.

The cumulative effect of these constraints was a sense that infrastructural challenges were systemic rather than incidental. Lecturers frequently expressed frustration at having to compensate for structural shortcomings through personal effort, improvisation, or the use of private resources.

4.3 Workload and Professional Pressure

Participants consistently reported a significant increase in workload during the transition to online teaching. Preparing digital materials required more time than preparing for face-to-face classes. Lecturers described long hours spent recording lectures, editing slides, responding to student messages, and troubleshooting technical issues. Many noted that students expected rapid responses, often contacting lecturers outside normal working hours.

Professional pressure was a recurring theme. Several lecturers felt compelled to demonstrate competence in the new digital environment, even when they lacked adequate training or support. Others described a sense of being constantly visible, as online teaching made their performance more open to scrutiny by colleagues and administrators. These experiences resonate with international studies documenting increased academic workloads and heightened expectations during the pandemic (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021).

The combination of increased workload and limited institutional recognition contributed to feelings of strain and, in some cases, burnout. Lecturers expressed concern that the additional labour required for online teaching was not fully acknowledged in workload models or performance evaluations.

4.4 Emotional and Psychological Impact

The emotional impact of emergency online teaching was evident across participant accounts. Stress, frustration, and fatigue were commonly reported, often linked to the cumulative pressures of technological challenges, increased workload, and broader pandemic-related uncertainty. Several lecturers described feeling overwhelmed by the constant need to adapt, respond, and remain available to students.

At the same time, many participants expressed a strong sense of responsibility towards their students. This sense of duty motivated continued engagement despite personal strain. Lecturers spoke of wanting to maintain continuity for students who were themselves facing significant challenges, including financial hardship, limited access to devices, and unstable home environments. These findings align with recent research highlighting the emotional labour undertaken by academics during the pandemic, particularly in contexts where student vulnerability was pronounced (Quezada et al., 2020).

The findings suggest that emotional labour formed a significant, though often unacknowledged, component of academic work during the pandemic. The interplay between professional commitment and personal strain shaped lecturers' experiences in complex ways, underscoring the need for institutional strategies that support both pedagogical and emotional resilience.

5. Discussion

The findings illustrate how lecturer preparedness, institutional capacity, and the wider conditions of academic labour shaped the experience of emergency online teaching. Lecturer accounts from Sri Lanka mirror global patterns while also revealing pressures that arise in settings marked by uneven

digital infrastructure and limited organisational support. The rapid transition to online teaching exposed gaps in digital competence and pedagogical readiness that extended beyond individual skill levels. These gaps reflect structural issues that require coordinated institutional and policy responses rather than reliance on personal adaptability. International research has similarly argued that emergency remote teaching revealed longstanding weaknesses in digital strategy and staff development across higher education systems (Bond et al., 2021).

Institutional capacity played a central role in shaping the quality and sustainability of online teaching. Lecturers described infrastructural fragility, inconsistent access to devices, and unreliable connectivity as persistent barriers that disrupted teaching continuity. These challenges align with studies from other low- and middle-income contexts, where digital inequality has been shown to constrain pedagogical innovation and staff wellbeing (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). The Sri Lankan experience demonstrates that institutional readiness is not simply a technical concern but a determinant of academic working conditions. When infrastructure fails, lecturers shoulder the responsibility of compensating for systemic shortcomings through additional time, emotional effort, and personal resources.

The emotional burden reported by lecturers reflects wider scholarship on academic wellbeing during the pandemic. Researchers have documented heightened stress, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion among academic staff, often linked to increased workloads, blurred work–life boundaries, and the pressure to support students facing their own difficulties (Daddow et al., 2024; Zhu & Wang, 2025). The present study contributes to this literature by situating emotional strain within a context of infrastructural fragility and limited institutional support. Lecturer accounts reveal how professional commitment and personal strain intersected, particularly when they felt responsible for sustaining student engagement despite their own challenges.

Lecturer resilience was evident across the dataset, although it should not be idealised or treated as a replacement for systemic preparedness. Resilience narratives risk obscuring the structural conditions that produce overwork and emotional strain, placing responsibility on individuals rather than institutions. Recent studies caution against framing resilience as an individual trait and instead calls for organisational approaches that address workload, support structures, and resource allocation (Raetze et al., 2022; Fischer et al., 2023). The findings reinforce this perspective. Lecturer adaptability enabled teaching to continue, but it did so at a personal cost and under conditions that were neither equitable nor sustainable.

The study highlights the need for a broader understanding of academic labour during crisis-driven educational transformation. Emergency online teaching cannot be understood solely in terms of digital competence or pedagogical adaptation. Institutional responsibility, infrastructural investment, and the emotional realities of academic work must also be considered. The Sri Lankan case offers insights relevant to other developing higher education systems, where digital expansion is often pursued without sufficient attention to staff development, workload management, or wellbeing. Strengthening institutional capacity, investing in digital infrastructure, and embedding meaningful support for academic staff are essential steps towards building more resilient and equitable online teaching environments.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined lecturer preparedness and pedagogical disruption during emergency online teaching in Sri Lankan higher education. The findings show that lecturers played a central role in sustaining teaching continuity despite significant digital, infrastructural, and emotional challenges. These experiences reveal the limitations of crisis-driven educational transformation when institutional readiness is uneven and when responsibility for continuity falls heavily on individual staff.

The analysis demonstrates that digital competence alone cannot compensate for weak infrastructure or inconsistent organisational support. Lecturer adaptability enabled teaching to continue, yet this adaptability was shaped by personal effort rather than systematic preparation. Academic staff were required to navigate unfamiliar technologies, redesign teaching materials at speed, and support students who were themselves facing considerable difficulties. These conditions placed additional pressure on lecturers and contributed to emotional strain that extended beyond routine academic work.

Future preparedness requires more than temporary solutions. Investment in digital infrastructure, sustained professional development, and clear institutional strategies for workload management are essential. Academic wellbeing must also be recognised as a core component of educational resilience, particularly in contexts where staff are expected to absorb the impact of systemic shortcomings. Lecturer experiences during COVID-19 offer important lessons for higher education systems seeking to strengthen their capacity to respond to future disruptions. A more balanced approach that combines technological readiness, organisational support, and attention to staff wellbeing will help ensure that emergency transitions do not place disproportionate strain on academic staff.

Author Contribution

All authors played a substantive role in shaping this study and developing the manuscript. C.W. conceptualised the work and designed the overall study framework. Data analysis, theme development and validation of findings were carried out collaboratively, with each author contributing to the discussions that informed the final results. C.O. and K.O.O. prepared the initial manuscript draft, covering the introduction, methods, results and discussion. Co-authors strengthened the analysis, offered detailed revisions and enhanced the clarity and coherence of the final document. Every author reviewed the complete manuscript, approved the final version and accepted responsibility for the integrity of the work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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