

Exploring the Challenges and Experiences of Students in Online Distance Learning (ODL) during Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has spread over the world, causing a health disaster since at the end of 2019. The majority of the higher education system operates through e-learning and students have to adapt to a new lifestyle. The majority of students believed that online classes need more work than traditional classes do. Hence, this study was dedicated to explore which challenges that affect the students and positive and negative response during online distance learning (ODL) among Diploma in Pharmacy students. The cross-sectional study design by means of online questionnaire distribution using Whatsapp and email involving diploma of pharmacy students in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Bertam Campus. The findings revealed that the most common cause of overall challenges faced by students was a lack of focus during online learning. In addition, two of them showed positive response against ODL, namely challenges impacting students study performance and mental health. Meanwhile, the respondents also showed three themed challenges with negative response against ODL which were challenges in interacting, gaining internet access and getting supports. Face-to-face learning was preferred by students over online learning. As a result, students were challenged differently to the shift in this current learning method.

Keywords: Challenges, Online Distance Learning, Covid-19

Introduction

The world is facing a health crisis as Covid-19 pandemic has spread globally since at the end of 2019. Many countries' economies are significantly affected due to Covid-19. Further, the epidemic altered working conditions across the globe. About 120 countries stopped face-to-face learning and over 1.2 billion kids are out of the classroom worldwide. Almost all the nation, including the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has ordered the closure of public schools and shutdown of higher education as an emergency measure to prevent the spread of infection in order to counter the COVID-19 pandemic (Shahzad et al., 2020). According to UNESCO (2021), this health outbreak has resulted in over 1.5 billion out-of-schools children and teens, varying from pre-primary to higher education students.

Hence, this calls out for online teaching and learning, shifting the pedagogy of education from a traditional to a modern method (Mishra et al., 2020). Nevertheless, many schools were not ready to apply home learning programs yet due to a lack of preparation in this country. The home learning programmes were reported by students to be even more stressful than regular schools (Amir et al., 2020). Many students say that the workload of online classes is larger than that of regular classes. Some students also feel that online classes take out the benefits of having friends to socialize with in class. But the real sufferers of the government's order to close school are students in less fortunate situations. They lack devices and internet access to be able to take part in online classes.

Therefore, the proposed study is aimed to assess the challenges of online learning through the eye of students during a pandemic among Diploma of Pharmacy students at University Technology MARA, Penang Branch. In return, this study could be used as a basis for education and education authorities to improve the learning process in online education in Malaysia. Thus, it is important to identify the challenges faced by the students during this new norm of learning so the problems can be addressed and improved.

Literature Review

Online learning systems are defined as web-based applications that run, distribute and track courses over the Internet (Keis et al., 2017). This is when technology plays a critical role to aid in online learning as studies are done remotely. Thus, education-related technologies are made available such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Platform, Zoom, and Webex Blackboard to adapt to the new needs of e-learning (Shahzad et al., 2020). They provide a few platforms for teachers to opt but due to the strong engagement between students and teachers in traditional classrooms, students frequently regarded the new educational method as unengaging and boring (Rizvi and Nabi, 2021). According to the World Bank (June 2020), this becomes a stress test on the education system around the globe.

The digitalization of educational learning has also challenged those with limited internet access and resources (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Zhong, 2020). This happened as this pandemic disparately affected rich and poor resulting in a varying capacity of students' participation in online learning (Zhong, 2020). Therefore, adequate resources are supposed to be offered by the university administration. This is to eliminate delays and unforeseen technical problems in accessing online learning material (Almaiah et al., 2020).

Besides, internal factors like difficulty concentrating and time management were also challenging to students during this pandemic (Amir et al., 2020). This happened due to home environments which were claimed to be distractive as they were more likely to be distracted by house chores or their own families. Furthermore, difficulty focusing was also affected by continuous attention at the screen, internet, video games, and social media (Son et al., 2020). To note, students have also been challenged with an overload of information, heavy workload, role uncertainly, and "mind wandering" (Kohan et al., 2017).

The conceptual structure of this investigation is shown in Figure 1. These challenges arise from the abrupt shift of traditional face-to-face learning to online learning and thus have impact on the students' performance indeed. While the students' response of ODL, both positively and negatively, are the ones that contributed to the preference of method of learning either traditional face-to face learning or online learning. Therefore, the proposed study is aimed to assess the challenges of online learning through the eye of students during

a pandemic among Pharmacy students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang. Hence, the following goals were investigated in this study:

- To explore which challenge affect the students the most when they were involved in the online distance learning.
- To determine positive and negative responses against ODL.
- To identify the preferred method among students.

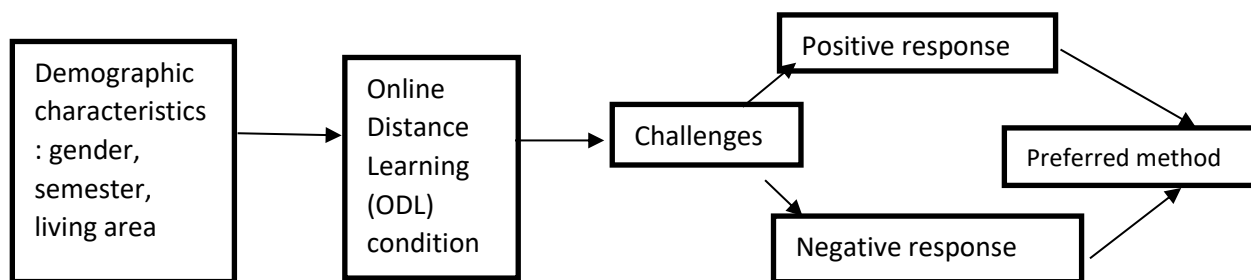


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Study Design

A cross-sectional study design was conducted in this study from November 2020 to June 2021. A questionnaire survey was distributed to students to investigate the challenges encountered by students, responses during Online Distance Learning as well as preferred teaching method among students.

Sample Collection

The respondents were chosen among Diploma in Pharmacy students based on their willingness availability. Students will be invited to participate in the survey via google form, which will be distributed online to subjects who have agreed to participate, along with written instructions for full participation.

Data Collection

The study employed self-directed questionnaire includes which includes a Demographic Data Sheet (DDT) and selected a few questions with different designs, such as a single choice and multiple choice response based on the SWOC analysis. The SWOC analysis was conducted to understand various strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges associated with online mode of learning during this critical situation.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by frequency of student's response and stated in percentages. The obtained result were used to determine the overall challenges faced by the students during the ODL as well as Likert Scale was employed to assess the impact on the students against ODL.

Results and Discussions

Respondents' Demographic

Majority who answered the questionnaires were 195 females (85.9%) while the other 32 males (14.1%) (Table 1). Besides, most of respondents come from semester 4 (n = 124) and semester 2 (n= 103). The biggest proportion of the respondents, 127 students (55.9%) were also living in the sub urban area compared to 77 students (33.90%) and 23 students (10.1%) originated from urban area and rural area respectively (Table 1). Conclusively, female respondents, semester 4 students and those who lived in sub-urban area had the most contribution for the result in this study.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Item	Frequency	Percentage%
Gender		
male	32	14.1
female	195	85.9
Semester		
2	103	45.4
4	124	54.6
Living area		
Urban	77	33.9
Sub- urban	127	55.9
Rural	23	10.1

Challenge faced by students during online distance learning

Internet Connectivity

Out of the 227 respondents, most of them, 226 (99.6%) answered yes in having internet access at their workplace during online distance learning. The biggest proportion of those who had access to internet used mobile hotspot and home internet, both with 63.0% each. They shared the same (n=143) number of respondents who voted for yes. More than a third (n≥ 76) of the respondents use prepaid phone card to participate in the virtual learning, voted by 77 (33.9%) respondents. Only a small number of the respondents used public hotspot (4.4%) and using broadband (4.0%). Majority of the students had unlimited data (55.9%). Some of them had more than 20 GB (14.5%) and between 5 to 20 GB (21.6%) data. Only 18 (7.9%) had less than 5 GB. Despite that, more than half (n=125) of the respondents claimed that they faced limited internet access (55.1%). Majority of them had limited internet access due to signal's strength (61.4%). Meanwhile, some students struggled with cost of internet access (15.2%) and technical issues (12.7%) respectively. Besides, only 59 (26.9%) respondents had financial constraint in using internet access. Some of them self-supported their own bills (39.2%), lack of funds from parents (5.9%) and need to pay high cost of high-speed internet (40.2%). Furthermore, based on the data obtained, all 227 students (100%) have no problem in internet devices as they have their own devices to use during online learning. The largest proportion was laptop (98.7%) slightly higher than smartphone (97.4%). Some of them (n=28) had tablet (12.3%) while a few of them (n=11) had desktop (4.8%). The largest proportion of the respondents also communicated through Google Meet (96.9%). WhatsApp (92.1%), Ufuture (91.6%), Google Classroom (89.9%) and Microsoft Teams (81.5%).

Only a few of them who communicated via Google Form (21.6%), Zoom (4.8%) and Skype (1.3%). In addition, 150 students, (66.1%) had difficulty accessing online information, while only 77 (33.9%) have no difficulty accessing online information. Most of them were challenged with slow connection (67.8%). A lot of them were also troubled with lagging devices (54.4%) and server down (48.0%). Majority of students also specifically mentioned that Ufuture's server down when taking test (22.8%) and too many platforms (5.3%) when accessing the online information. Only a small percentage of the students were troubled with no internet access at their places (7.0%).

Overall Challenges

Table 2 presented the challenges faced by 227 students of diploma pharmacy. Majority of them agreed that lack of focus affected their studies during the pandemic (72.2%). Accordingly, students agreed that procrastination (62.6%), the environment at home (55.1%) and responsibility to do house chores (48.9%) had made them struggle to study during ODL. Additionally, students experienced a quite number of barriers such as difficulty in understanding lectures (29.1%), lack of motivation (27.3%), difficulty interacting with friends for group assignment (26.9%), limited internet access (26.0%), increased stress (25.6%) and extreme fatigue (18.5%). However, only a small number of students had to share facility with others (12.3%), encountered financial constraint (8.8%), difficulty in accessing online information (7.0%) and their grade affected (4.8%) as their individual challenges that impacted their studies. In addition, a total of 12 (5.3%) students shared the same percentage of having difficulty to reach lecturers and feelings of isolation. Surprisingly, the lack of family and friends' supports were also contributed to the obstacle in online learning, 4 students (1.8%). To conclude, lack of focus was the most challenging factor of online learning that affected the quality of students' learning during this outbreak.

Table 2

Challenges of ODL faced by students

Challenge	percentage
Limited internet access	26.0%
Financial constraints	8.8%
Difficulty in accessing online information	17.0%
Responsibility to do house chores	48.9%
Environment at home	55.1%
Shared facility	12.3%
Procrastination	62.6%
Lack of focus	72.2%
Ineffective time management	47.1%
Affected grade	4.8%
Difficulty to understand lectures	29.1%
Difficulty to interact with friends for group assignment	26.9%
Difficulty to reach lecturers	5.3%
Increased stress	25.6%
Extreme fatigue	18.5%
Lack of motivation	27.3%
Feelings of isolation	15.3%
Lack of family support	1.8%
Lack of friends' support	1.8%

Response against ODL

A five-point Likert Scale was analysed to explore the challenges of ODL among the respondents. Very poor, poor, neutral, good, and very good were labelled with 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, respectively. The value of 1 is the minimum value while 5 is the maximum value which indicates different mean. Responses regarding online learning yielded various responses. There were 5 themed challenged for this objective which are a) gain stable internet access b) impact on study performance c) barriers to interact during online class d) impact on students' mental health and e) struggle to gain support. In addition, positive response against ODL means students faced challenges in online study while negative response against ODL means students were not affected by the shift in the education system. Overall, this meant that out of 5 themed challenges, only two of them showed positive response against ODL, namely challenges impacting students study performance and mental health. Lastly, the respondents showed three themed challenges with negative response against ODL which were challenges in interacting, gaining internet access and getting supports. (Table 3)

Table 3

Response against Online Distance Learning

Challenge	Response
gain stable internet access	negative
impact on study performance	positive
barriers to interact during online class	negative
students' mental health	
struggle to gain support	positive
	negative

Preferred Learning Method

Table 4 represents frequency analysis to check the number of respondents in each response for variable of preferred method of study. Majority of students preferred to study by involving themselves in face-to-face learning compared to the ODL. A total of 167 (73.6%) students opted for face-to-face learning method compared to only 60 (26.4%) students voted for ODL.

Table 4

Frequency table of preferred method of study

Preferred method of study	Frequency, <i>n</i>	Percentage (%)
Online Distance Learning	60	26.4
Face-to-face learning	167	73.6
Total	227	100.0

Discussion

Based on our findings, lack of focus is the major challenge encountered by the students during Online Distance Learning (ODL). Our study is in line with research from Son et al. (2020) in which they discovered that majority of respondents were suffering with the difficulty to focus during an online class. Besides, students nowadays had struggled to keep their focus during the long, continuous attention to the gadget used. This was all due to the shift of new educational teaching method. A huge proportion of the students also experienced procrastination and this findings also similar with the study reported by Son et al (2020) which revealed that the participants' tendency to procrastinate due to the disruptive environment at home and the needs to help family members to do house chores as well as the condition at home was more suitable to relax than study. In addition, our research showed that majority of students stressed during ODL. In addition, this finding is consistent with the study conducted by Amir et al (2020), which showed that lack of motivation was related with the preparedness towards online learning. The capacity of students' participation in class also varied among rich and poor students as the pandemic disparately affected them (Zhong, 2020). Thus, one with limited resources and internet access would be challenged because of

the transformation of educational world, from traditional face-to-face to the digitalization learning (Adnan and Anwar, 2020; Zhong, 2020).

Not surprisingly, our data revealed that a majority of them preferred to study by using the traditional face-to-face learning. The above outcome is consistent with the study by Rizvi & Nabi (2021) which reported that students prefer face-to-face learning could be due to the strong engagement between students and teachers in the traditional classrooms. Besides, face-to-face learning offered faster feedback than in the ODL. Furthermore, Kemp & Grieve (2014) concluded that ODL involved students self-driving themselves to study as students faced a few barriers as not all students responded positively to the shift in academic due to the pandemic in the same way as their peers.

In another study by Amir et al (2020) discovered that students struggle in managing their times to participate in the online class, revising the academic class, studying for the tests, and doing assignments. Similarly, according to Son et al (2020) other internal factors associated with online learning was the need to spend their times with the family as well as to help their families with house chores. However, surprisingly 24.6% of students opted ODL rather than traditional teaching. In contrast, web-based learning was more challenging due to self-studying which affected them differently. Only a small percentage regarded that studying before the outbreak was more challenging for them. To sum up, most of the respondents preferred face-to-face learning as compared to the ODL.

Conclusion

In summary, this study set out to determine the challenges and obstacles faced by the students through the implementation of ODL and the most preferred teaching mode of learning. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that majority students experienced lack of focus in ODL in their home that affect students' academic performance and mental health. The following conclusion can be drawn from the study that students preferred face-to-face learning rather than ODL due to the many challenges and barriers that affect their study during online distance learning. Despite of the advantages of face-to-face learning, ODL can give students the convenience of studying at different times and locations as well as hosting study sessions, conversations, and seminars in the comfort of their own homes. But however, a sizable portion of them still lack access to affordable excellent internet service. Our study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of various challenges faced by students during online learning and improving the teaching process as well. Nonetheless, there are some minor limitations in this study. The present study involved a small group of students from only one program in one campus. Hence, the findings of this study could not be applied generally to all ODL students in all courses on one campus. Other drawbacks in this research, there may be a bias in the result in which the total numbers of female outweighs more than male students in this course. This investigation was carried out when ODL was suddenly imposed because to the COVID-19 epidemic. ODL's deployment following COVID-19 may therefore offer a different perspective because students and instructors were better prepared and aware of its implementation. To get greater knowledge and understanding on this subject, it is recommended that further research be done in the investigation of the adoption of ODL between pre and post Covid-19.

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