

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATION
STRATEGY IN MINIMIZING
DIGITAL INEQUALITIES IN
ONLINE REMOTE TEACHING AND
LEARNING FOR EDUCATORS AND
B40 STUDENTS DURING THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC.**

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the disparities in digital access, significantly affecting B40 students and educators in online and remote learning settings. These disparities emphasised the urgent need for targeted interventions to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to education for all learners. Thus, this thesis aims to tackle this issue through four primary objectives. Firstly, it investigates the challenges faced by B40 students, emphasizing digital inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. Concurrently, it explores the obstacles educators encounter in remote teaching within the context of digital disparities. Secondly, the study seeks to understand the factors influencing students' and educators' readiness for online education and identifies communication platforms utilized during online learning. By employing qualitative research methodology, insights from twenty interviewees, consisting of both B40 students and higher education educators engaged in online learning during the lockdown, are meticulously examined using NVivo14. In addition, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is applied to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This rigorous approach facilitates thorough exploration and interpretation of individual experiences, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of online education during the pandemic from various viewpoints. Key findings from the study had discovered several helpful insights in developing communication strategies to minimise digital inequalities in online and remote learning during a pandemic outbreak. The first finding unsurfaced multifaceted challenges for both educators and B40 students as they faced various challenges spanning engagement, interactions, and access to resources, exacerbating digital inequalities. Issues like inadequate devices, limited connectivity, and inhibitory learning environments hinder effective teaching and learning activities. Secondly, educators and B40 students' readiness for online learning is shaped by factors like self-efficacy, digital accessibility, and emotional well-being. Educators' preparedness relies on confidence in adapting teaching methods and digital skills gained through training, while students' readiness is influenced by digital literacy and motivation. Thirdly, communication platforms serve vital functions, enabling real-time interactions, enable synchronous group discussions and feedback, fostering active participation. Asynchronous communication supports multimedia usage and ongoing monitoring. Learning Management Systems streamline course management, assessments, and attendance tracking, ensuring efficient administration and engagement in remote education. Lastly, communication strategies in pandemic-era online learning combat digital inequalities such as synergy that fosters collaboration and inclusivity, while multiplatform approaches ensure accessibility. Collaborative teaching and continual improvements enhance engagement and adaptability. Prudent supports provide essential resources and skill development, while Hyflex delivery promotes flexibility and equity through blended learning methods. Based on these key findings, the researcher had developed a model called Educational Technology Integration and Communication (ETIC) Model that serves as a communication strategy model, emphasizing the integration of technology within educational contexts. Rather than focusing solely on educational strategies, the ETIC Model recognizes the importance of effective communication in facilitating technology integration.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The historical trajectory of pandemics has undeniably left an indelible mark on the education sector, shaping its evolution and response to unforeseen challenges. Examining notable instances, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, provides insights into the adaptive measures taken by educational institutions throughout history. Piret and Boivin (2021) had defined the progression from an outbreak to an epidemic and, ultimately, a pandemic delineates the evolving scope of a health crisis. Each phase—from outbreak to epidemic and pandemic—requires tailored responses, with localized containment efforts giving way to broader interventions and, in the case of a pandemic, necessitating international collaboration to effectively monitor, control, and mitigate the global impact of the health threat.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia which began in late 2019 until the enforced full lockdown, necessitated a rapid transition to online and remote learning in higher education institutions. As insti closed to curb the virus's spread in early 2020, universities and colleges quickly adopted online platforms (Nagel, 2020). While this allowed for continued education, it also highlighted existing digital inequalities, especially among B40 students, who constitute the lower-income group in Malaysia, encompassing households with limited financial resources (Bernama, 2020) with a net income below RM4,850 per month (Carvalho, 2023). The government implemented initiatives to support online learning, such as providing laptops and internet access. Despite challenges like technical difficulties and reduced face-to-face interaction, institutions adapted their teaching methods and support services. As the pandemic situation improved in late 2020 and early 2021, hybrid learning models emerged, combining online and in-person instruction (Raes, 2022).

The integration of information technology into teaching and learning activities across disciplines holds immense potential; however, it remains susceptible to digital inequalities, which have further widened the information gap among learners (Ali, 2020). Leveraging communication technologies to facilitate interactions between