

CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ODL AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY OF UiTM PAHANG

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges students faced in ensuring effective learning process while incorporating digital technologies in the middle of Covid-19 pandemic. It was found that efforts of the Malaysian government, universities and educators to promote the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) were constrained and limited by numerous obstacles faced by the students. The main focus of this study was to identify the students' setbacks to their learning outcomes. Questionnaires through Google Forms were distributed to 92 students from four different faculties in Jengka and Raub campuses. The objective was to find answers to these three questions: students' physical obstacles, effectiveness of ODL and students' emotional challenges. The findings concluded that these students were overwhelmed by both their coursework and also their lecturers. The lecturers' expectation also played a big role in this difficult situation, forcing students to feel worried and pressured. Nevertheless, this study also found other contributing factors that impede their learning outcome; networking factors, family support and the students' perspective towards their studies. Based on the data collected, in-depth analysis, conclusions and recommendations were made in the hope that our findings could help them become better students, and the educators to be more reasonable.

Keywords: Covid-19, ODL, UiTM

Introduction

The 2019 coronavirus outbreak, better known as Covid-19, was first detected in mid-December 2019 in the city of Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province located about 1,200 km south of Beijing. The world was shocked by the declaration of Covid-19 as a pandemic by WHO on 11 March 2020 due to the rapid rate of transmission of this virus and its extreme effects as well as lack of seriousness in efforts to combat the spread of this virus (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). To date, the Covid-19 outbreak has spread to at least 187 countries and territories in the world and has infected more than 5.6 million people and resulted in more than 350,000 deaths.

Since 18 March 2020, the Movement Control Order (MCO) has been imposed on Malaysians to control the increase in the number of positive cases and also to curb the source of the alarming Covid-19 outbreak. To date, Malaysians have undergone four (4) phases of MCO and the latest is the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) phase, which began

on 4 May 2020. Among the MCO methods is the total ban on public movements and gatherings throughout the country, including religious, sports, social and cultural activities. Full travel restrictions on Malaysians going abroad and all tourists and foreigners into the country have also been enforced. The closure of all educational institutions including primary and secondary schools, IPTA and IPTS, colleges, polytechnics and all skills institutes is one of the MCO methods used to prevent the spread of Covid-19 infection (“Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic”, 2020).

Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Dr. Noraini Ahmad has recommended that all institutions of higher learning (IPT), whether public or private, must implement PdP virtually (Mohammad Shatar Sabran, 2020). The majority of public universities have alternative strategies and measures for face-to-face learning practices to virtual learning such as online PdP systems or e-learning that are created in line with current educational developments.

The onset of this pandemic has seen many students experienced sickness or death in their families, food or housing insecurity and taking care of siblings more often than before. According to Deputy Education Minister Datuk Dr Mah Hang Soon, a concerted effort by the education authorities helped reduce the number of school dropouts by more than 10,000 students during the Covid-19 pandemic period (Carvalho, 2021). He added that a total of 11,301 school dropouts were recorded between March and December 2020 and only a total of 10,051 students dropped out of school between January and July 2021. This brings the total number of dropouts from March 2020, when the pandemic was declared, and July 2021 to 21,316 students.

As educators, we need to address the different needs of vulnerable students to ensure that this pandemic does not further hinder the inclusion of these students. This can be achieved by ensuring all IPTA and IPTS are able to provide equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources and to make sure that socio-emotional needs of the students are being met. Only then a positive impact on students’ learning despite the chaos happening around them can be managed.

UiTM complies with the directive that PdP is not implemented face-to-face for the safety of students and lecturers: instead, UiTM utilises Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The ODL is used to cover a variety of approaches, either face-to-face (synchronous learning) or non-face-to-face (asynchronous learning). The instruction was effective starting 16 March 2020 at UiTM Pahang Branch and was implemented in the 4th week of the lecture. Therefore, on 13 April 2020, the ODL lecture for the March-July 2020 semester began. For students with internet access, they could take classes using Microsoft Teams, Facebook Live or Google Classroom. Interactions could also be implemented through various chat applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Messenger that allowed students and lecturers to discuss learning at any time.

ODL is not a foreign thing in universities, much less through the philosophy of cybergogy (virtual learning) that is so close to today’s generation apart from heutagogy (self-learning) and paragogy (peer-oriented learning). Even so, this style of learning is not as easy as it is expected to be. Public Universities and Private Higher Education Institutions that did not make full use of online learning in the implementation of PdP were not allowed to continue online learning activities by the Ministry of Higher Education as it took into account the interests of students so that they were not left behind if they did not have internet access. This was because in reality, our national education system was still not able to fully support virtual learning as well as diverse learning modes (“Akses Internet Terhad”, 2020).

Undoubtedly internet access capabilities and mobility limitations were the biggest obstacles in the implementation of ODL (“Akses Internet Terhad”, 2020). Were UiTM students able to face this PdP challenge which was very different from the usual norm? What were their obstacles in adapting themselves to the mode of acquiring knowledge from their respective

homes without having to rush to the lecture hall? What is the level of students' acceptance of ODL for the purpose of fulfilling their 'student learning time' (SLT)? Therefore, this study would like to identify the challenges students faced in achieving their full potential amidst the unpredictable and chaotic Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

A lot of researches related to online learning have dated back to the beginnings of the eighties and the corpus regarding this topic continues to expand (Siti Maziha & Devarajoo, 2020). Online learning refers to e-learning where teachers and learners teach and learn, using suitable learning platforms (Kanuka & Anderson, 2007 as cited in Ramlan Mustapha et. al., 2021). Online learning includes online training, e-learning, web learning, cyber learning, computer education or network-based instructions (Urdu & Weggen, 2000 as cited in Ramlan Mustapha et. al., 2021). In the early 2000, studies by the National Centre for Education showed an uptrend demand and acceptance of online learning (Waits & Lewis, 2003 as cited in Siti Maziha & Devarajoo, 2020).

In 2020, Siti Maziha Mustapha and Khartiyaini Devarajoo published a research titled "Malaysian Undergraduate Students' Experiences of Online Learning in the Midst of Covid-19 Pandemic". They investigated students' perception and experiences of online learning. A qualitative method was used whereby 13 undergraduate (diploma and first degree) students were interviewed online. A thematic analysis was used. They found that students had mixed feelings about their e-learning experiences during the pandemic. Many claimed to have experienced various benefits of online learning but there were also students who were overwhelmed and stressed out with the new mode of teaching and learning.

In their research titled, "An Exploration on Online Learning Challenges in Malaysian Higher Education: The Post Covid-19 Pandemic Outbreak", Ramlan Mustapha et. al. (2021) investigated online learning challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. Their study employed both qualitative and Fuzzy Delphi methods in collecting data. Open-ended questions were distributed to 118 respondents while in the Fuzzy Delphi phase, they distributed questionnaires to seven experts in the field of the study. The data gathered from the qualitative study revealed that students using online learning faced seven major challenges: internet coverage, mental fatigue, learning devices, environmental disturbance, pedagogical challenges, lack of motivation and social interaction.

Siti Norliana Ghazali (2021) published an article titled "Challenges Faced by Students in Online Learning" whereby she states that UiTM decided to resort to ODL implementation to ensure that students could continue their studies during the pandemic and graduate on time. In the past, UiTM had practised Blended Learning but not all lecturers were involved in the implementation (p. 36). Thus, she claimed that the sudden change to using online platforms for classes during the pandemic has been a culture shock to both lecturers and students (p. 36). She outlined some of the major limitations confronted by students in online learning. They were as follows: costly and unreliable internet connection, not having the essential tools (i.e. laptops), noise and disruption from unfavourable environment, family problems and self-discipline (p. 36-37).

Method

The purpose of the study entitled *ODL: Jiwa Rabak, Mental Koyak* which was carried out at the UiTM Pahang Branch is to obtain supporting data to study the three main objectives, namely:

1. The physical obstacles faced by students during ODL
2. The effectiveness of ODL
3. The emotional turmoil that students have to bear during ODL

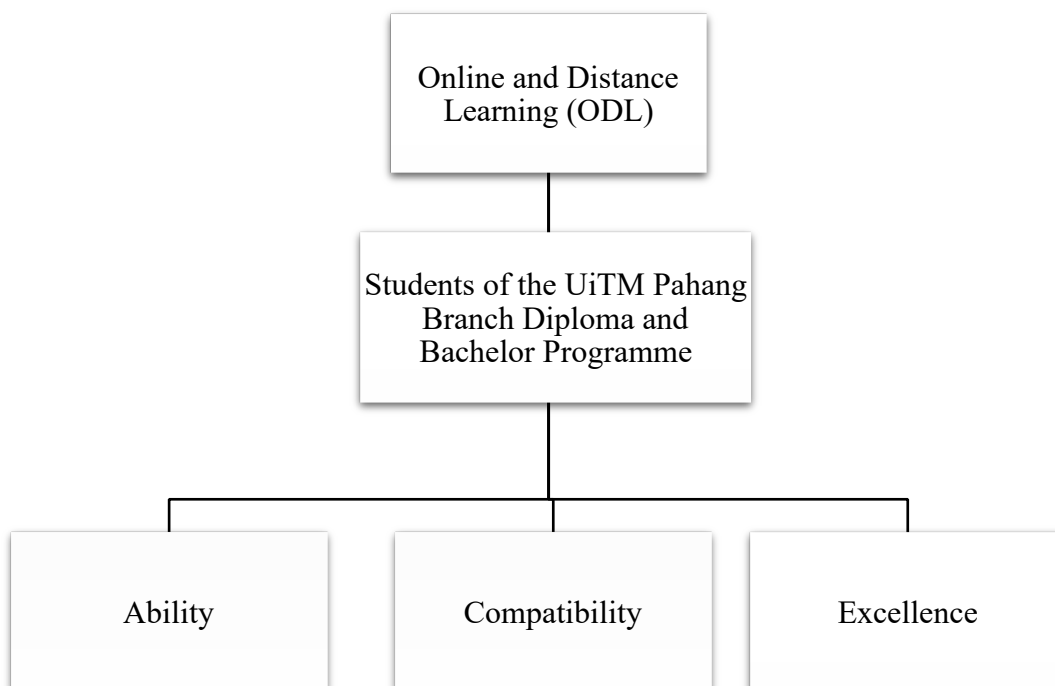


Figure 1. ODL conceptual framework

Using descriptive analysis, this research examines the views of the UiTM Pahang Branch students on issues related to the physical challenges faced during ODL, their level of trust in ODL in their learning and the emotional turmoil they have to bear when undergoing ODL. Survey forms (Google Forms) were used.

A total of 92 students consisting of undergraduate and diploma students of the UiTM Pahang Branch were involved in this study. Four groups of students from different faculties were identified (two groups each at the UiTM Pahang Jengka and Raub Branches). The faculties involved are AS257 (degree) and AM110, BA118 and BA119 (diploma).

41 students were from Jengka Campus (15 students were from the AS2573A degree programme while 26 students were from the BA1182E diploma programme). Meanwhile, another 51 students were from the Raub Campus (23 AM1101B diploma students and 28 BA1192C diploma students).

Results and Discussion

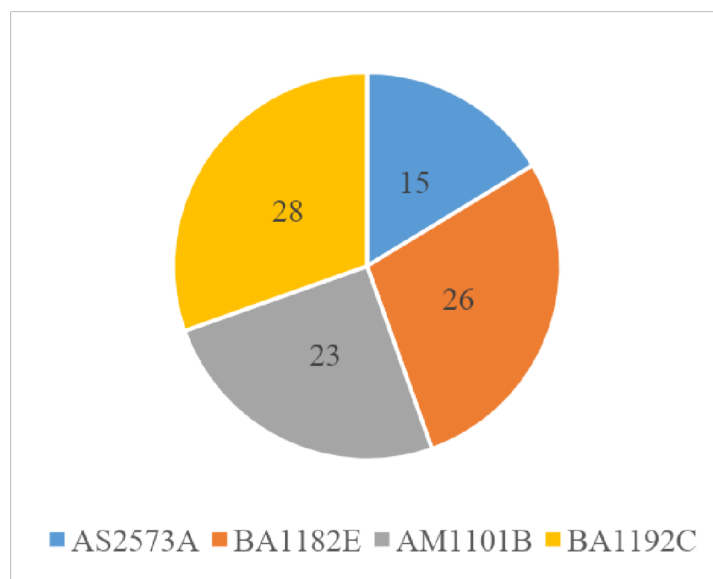


Figure 2. Number of students

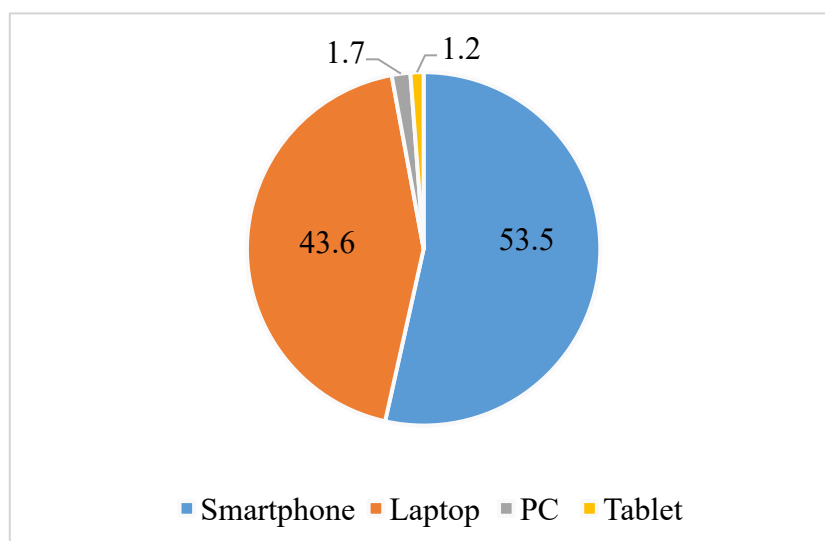


Figure 3. Choice of device during ODL

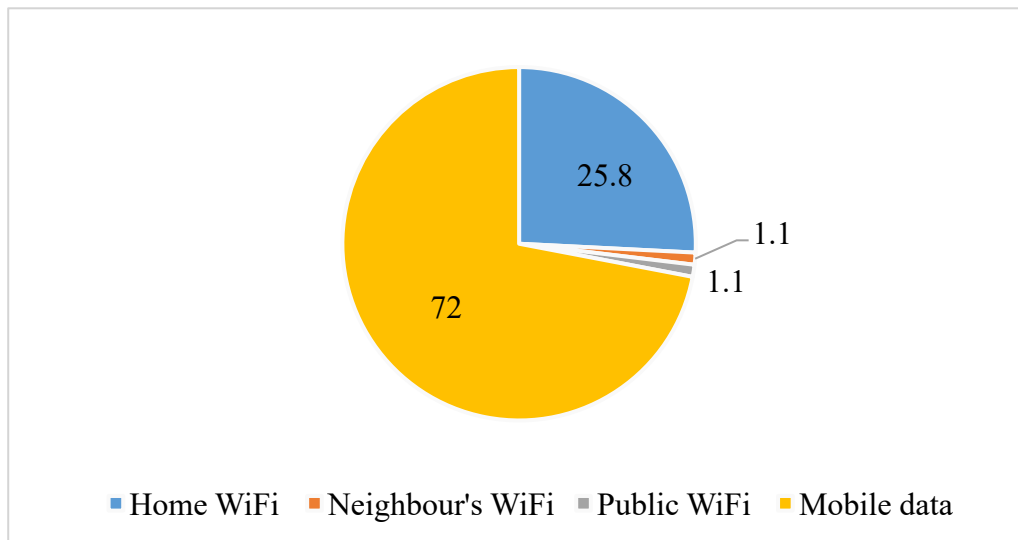


Figure 4. Methods of accessing the internet

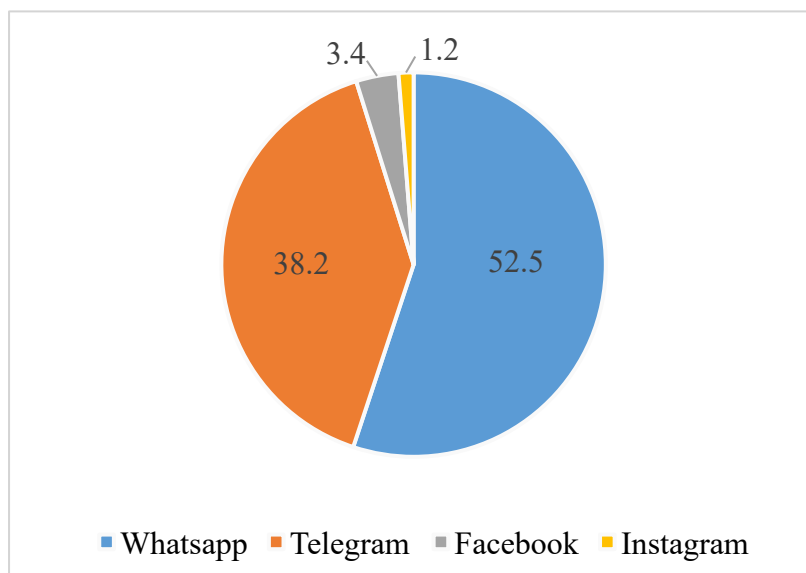


Figure 5. Online platform used

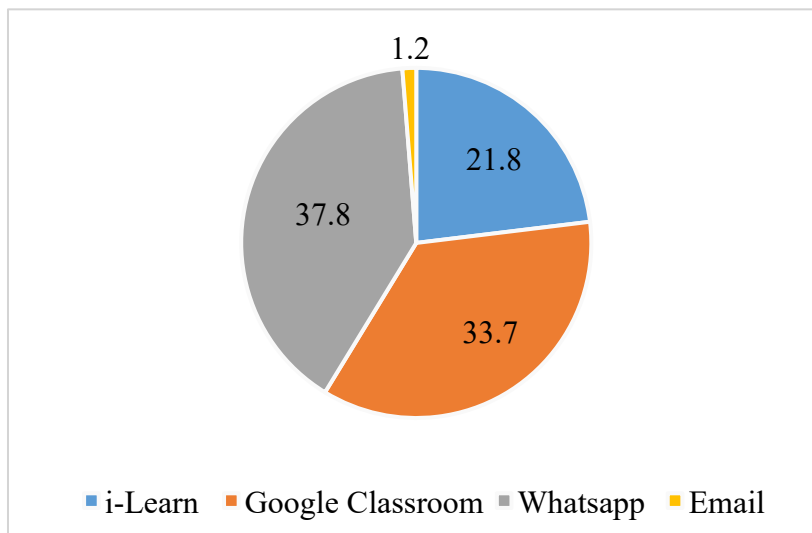


Figure 6. Platform of choice for ODL

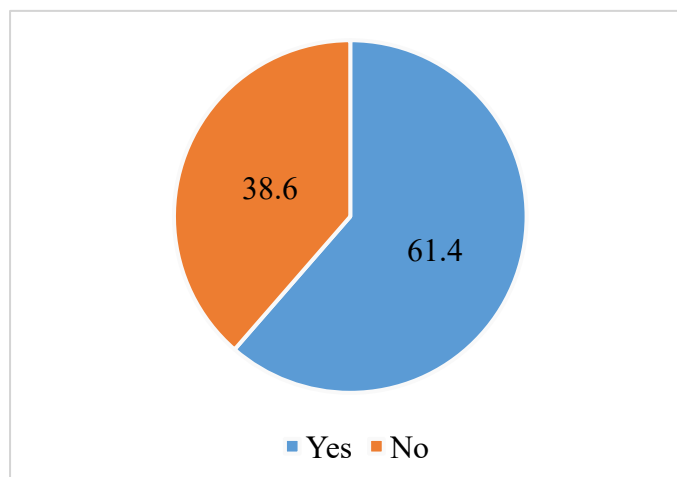


Figure 7. Effectiveness of ODL

In this feedback explanation, undergraduate and diploma students will be referred to as respondents. ODL stands for Open Distance Learning, whereas PdP refers to the teaching and learning process. Based on Figure 7 above, 61.4% of the respondents were confident in the effectiveness of the lecture sessions in the March-July 2020 semester conducted via ODL. Meanwhile, 38.6% felt that PdP via ODL was not effective for them. The researchers believe that the majority of respondents felt confident in the effectiveness of ODL is because they have been exposed to online learning systems such as Blended Learning and MOOC throughout their studies at UiTM and may be due to factors such as having good internet access, be it their home WiFi or large mobile data plans as well as a conducive home atmosphere.

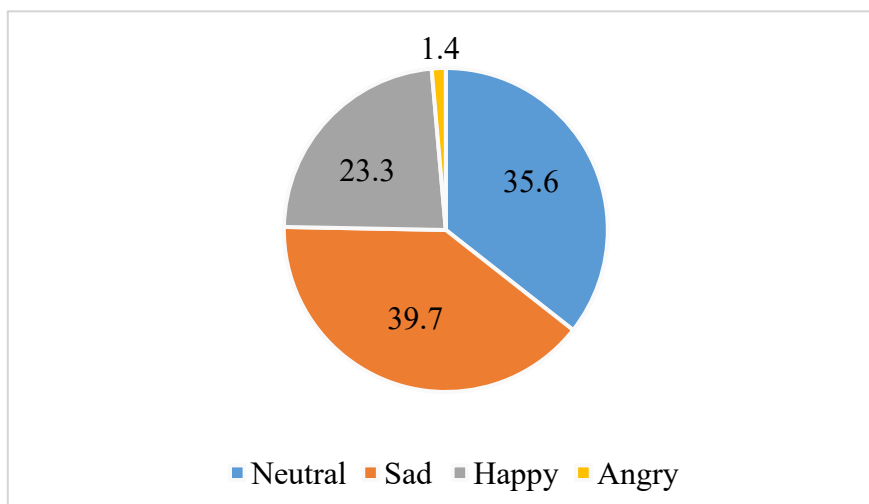


Figure 8. ODL acceptance level

Based on Figure 8 above, 39.7% of the respondents felt unhappy about the usage of ODL for PdP in the March-July 2020 semester while 35.6% of the respondents were neutral. 23.3% were happy to follow PdP in ODL and 1.4% were angry. The percentage of students stating that they have become accustomed to online learning is more or less the same as feeling unhappy with this type of PdP. According to the researcher's perception, this relatively similar percentage may be due to UiTM students that have been exposed to Blended Learning and MOOC learning in their study plans. Therefore, they did not experience total culture shock when ODL was enforced. The feeling of unhappiness may be due to the physical and mental unreadiness of students in following ODL at home without classmates and lecturers in the classroom as in the previous semester. The 23.3% of respondents who felt happy following ODL may be excited about the new PdP system that gave them a lot of freedom, which was more flexible, like learning from home without having to prepare to go to class. 1.4% who were angry with the enforcement of ODL may be because they were not prepared since ODL was enforced quite suddenly and they did not make any proper preparation such as not bringing back reference books as well as laptops home.



Figure 9. The emotional turmoil of students

Listed above in Figure 9 are among the students' statements when asked to express the emotional unrest that plagued them throughout the course of the ODL system for the March-July 2020 semester. The list of students' emotional turmoil was derived from their responses when asked about the challenges faced during the ODL semester. It was found that the emotional unrest that students faced was almost the same in terms of eye health problems, mental health and emotional stress. Apart from that, other constraints that the majority of students faced were unstable internet connection problems and insufficient mobile data. All of these factors contributed to students' academic performance as well as their test and examination results that particular ODL semester.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the sudden closure of universities globally due to COVID-19 pandemic, surprisingly introduces a boundless transformation in our education system. Forced to endure the many challenges brought by ODL, students were not that ready to adapt to this novel approach to teaching and learning. Suffice to say that the readiness of the students was the most important component of implementing ODL. Its implementation must also be centred on them and their physical challenges, financial constraints and state of mental health should be taken into consideration so that the learning outcome can be achieved. Ironically, who would have thought that this coronavirus, which is completely invisible to our naked eyes, is able to change not only the utilisation of technology in education but also the pedagogy strategies in the future. Does this mean the changes this virus have caused might be here to stay?

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