OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) FOR NON-LAW STUDENTS:

Challenges to Legal Education

By: **Nor Laila Ahmad**

The COVID-19 outbreak has dramatically changed lives throughout the world. In Malaysia, since March 2020, reports of positive cases of COVID-19 had resulted in the government imposing a movement control order (MCO). All Malaysians are required to stay home to prevent the virus from spreading fast in the community. The MCO has also changed the way learning activities are conducted in higher learning institutes.

The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) had instructed all universities in Malaysia, including Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), to conduct online classes and lectures by using the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) method. ODL is an educational process that allows students to receive an education without physically attending a classroom. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ODL has now become the norm. Learning activities were thus facilitated by information and communication technologies. Hence, ODL had made the lecturer's task more challenging in legal education, especially when it involved non-law students.

Method of ODL in Legal Education

Before the pandemic of COVID-19, lecturers conducted learning and teaching activities in the traditional classroom or via the face-to-face method, including for legal subjects. In UiTM, various legal subjects are offered to non-law students, namely Commercial Law, Administrative Law, Business Law, Malaysian Legal Princi-

ples, and Company Law. The rationale for having these subjects for non-law students is to encourage the graduates to have a basic understanding of legal principles. Besides, students are expected to apply legal principles to any situation involving legal issues.

Teaching and learning legal subjects are not easy tasks. What more if they are to be disseminated via ODL. First, lecturers need to prepare themselves with sufficient materials to be used in online or offline classes. Next, they have to decide on the most suitable and appropriate ODL methods. There are several methods in ODL, and these will depend on the subject and the target students. For instance, a higher institution like UiTM has given its lecturers great autonomy in developing ODL materials.

Generally, the process of ODL is based on Asynchronous and Synchronous learning. Synchronous learning is a two-way online education, and it is run in real-time between lecturers and students from different locations. In comparison, Asynchronous classes occur virtually online through prepared resources and a more relaxed schedule. Students can access the class materials uploaded on the selected learning management system (LMS) during different

hours without real-time lecturer interaction.

In facilitating the most out of the ODL, various online teaching tools are being used by lecturers, including video conferencing (Google Meet, Zoom, Skype, Webex) and social media such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook. Although legal education involves teaching problem-solving techniques, the lecturers need to be creative in delivering the lesson to non-law students. Additionally, ongoing assessments such as online quizzes, reflective reports, and group presentations will help non-law students better understand the law when they become familiar with case laws and statutes.

Challenges of ODL to Legal Education

ODL is a must, even though it involves legal education. The lecturers must ensure the syllabus is delivered well and that learning sessions do not get delayed. However, a major problem faced by lecturers is due to being inexperienced in establishing the platform for conducting ODL classes. Therefore, the lecturers should use multiple technologies and activities such as Discussion Forum and Google Docs to develop students' critical skills.

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Besides, a geographical area and a wide digital divide have always impeded the students' ability to participate in ODL classes. The students' location may affect internet access at home, especially in rural areas. Moreover, the students and lecturers, too, had experienced bad weather conditions like heavy rain, lightning, and floods, which affect their internet access. Thus, this factor always becomes a barrier, affecting students to be missing many things and having a problem understanding the legal subject taught using live lectures due to bad reception.

Students' ODL process also becomes an obstacle due to certain interruptions and distractions, such as working commitment and a large family household environment. In addition, parents, and siblings' interruptions during ODL sessions also can influence the students' performance and achievement. For example, having house chores like cooking and cleaning while attending ODL sessions causes the students to lack concentration during Synchronous lectures. Therefore, these factors can lower the student's motivation in the ODL process.

Another barrier of ODL to legal education is when the students have to deal with the overflow of continuous assignments on law subjects and other subjects. In legal subjects, the lecturer must ensure that the students understand law subjects and solve the problem-based question. Sometimes, the students face difficulties in doing their assignments, which can demotivate students to complete the task.
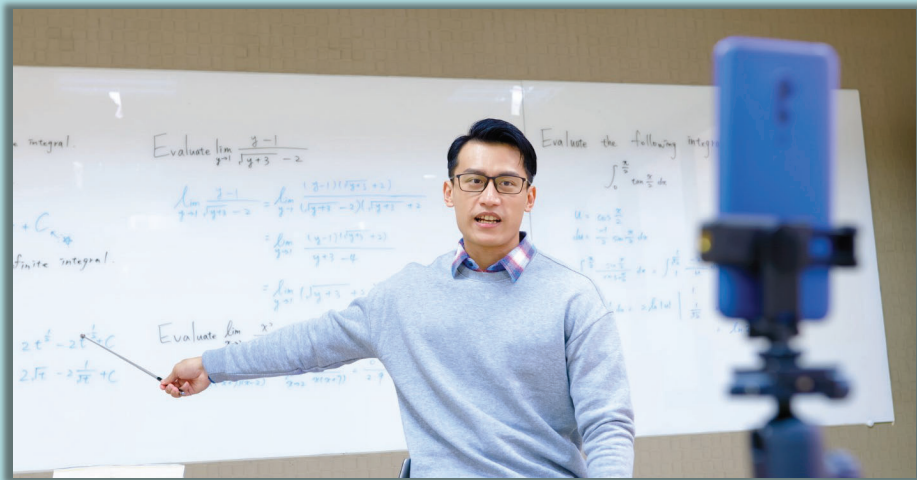
The ODL process can be more effective if students and lecturers are more creative in using various methods.

Possible Solution for Improving Legal Education

Learning legal subjects requires a tremendous amount and dedicated work from students. Therefore, the ODL process can be more effective and efficient if students and lecturers are more creative and innovative in using various methods. Undeniably, some interactive platforms can be used by lecturers, such as Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Quizlet. Thus, interactive technology might provide more interactions between lecturers and students, enhancing the learning outcomes.

In addition, student's feedback is a powerful means of improving the lecturers' quality in the ODL process. Lecturers will get a comprehensive insight into how the students responding to their ODL session. For example, if any student wants to know more about a certain topic, both the lecturer and student can set a private consultation. Hence, it will help to increase the effectiveness of the ODL sessions, and the learning outcomes can be achieved successfully.

Due to the limitation of internet coverage, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), in cooperation with the telecommunication companies,

had offered some affordable students' packages that can provide sufficient internet data to students. These packages help students to have better internet access in their homes, especially in rural areas. This offer is an important step to ensure the students enjoy a conducive ODL following the COVID-19 pandemic.

ODL also requires the students to determine their timeline to study and complete the assessments given by the lecturers. Therefore, students need to plan wisely throughout the day and balance the flexibility of ODL with a disciplined schedule. Other than that, students must be familiar with the latest technological gadgets and use variety of applications to ensure that the ODL process can be implemented efficiently and effectively. The lecturers and parents also play an important role in stimulating student's motivation.

The day will come when both lecturer and student will be able to gather in person again. Although the ODL is fully applied to all subjects for the first time during this pandemic, further shortcomings need to be improvised, especially in the legal subjects. Therefore, lecturers and students need to view this matter openly and positively by not thinking of the COVID-19 pandemic as a reason to complain about ODL.

NOR LAILA AHMAD

DO YOU KNOW?

Sumber Gambar: Getty Images ▲

ERIC YUAN, the founder of Zoom Video Communications, became the world's 130th richest person as demand for Zoom skyrocketed during pandemic. His net worth is estimated to be USD16.4 billion!

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PROFIL

Laila merupakan pensyarah undang-undang di UiTM Kampus Seremban. Beliau berasal dari Nibong Tebal, Pulau Pinang dan mendapat pendidikan awal di Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Acheh. Beliau mendapat pendidikan menengah di Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Sungai Acheh.

Beliau seterusnya menamatkan pengajian dalam Ijazah Sarjana Muda Undang-Undang, pada tahun 2011 di UiTM Shah Alam. Bagi menzahirkan impian beliau untuk menjadi seorang pendidik, beliau telah meneruskan pengajian di peringkat Sarjana Undang-Undang di institusi yang sama pada tahun 2012.

Pengalaman manis beliau sebagai pendidik bermula pada hujung tahun 2011 apabila beliau dilantik sebagai Pensyarah Sambilan Sepenuh Masa di UiTM Cawangan Kedah selama tiga semester berturut-turut dan satu semester di UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang.

Pada tahun 2014, beliau telah dilantik sebagai pensyarah sepenuh masa di UiTM Cawangan Negeri Sembilan. Bermula dari sini, beliau mula melangkah dengan lebih yakin dan berani untuk menempuhi segala onak duri dalam arena pendidikan yang penuh mencabar.

Bidang kepakaran beliau adalah termasuk Undang-Undang Perdagangan, Undang-Undang Perniagaan Lanjutan, Undang-Undang Pengguna dan Undang-Undang Pentadbiran.