READINESS FOR ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL): UNDERSTANDING THE ATTITUDES AMONG STUDENTS IN UITM PAHANG

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Abstract: This is a survey of 373 students enrolled in Diploma and Degree in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Pahang Campus. The main objective of this study is to determine the student's readiness and attitudes towards online distance learning. Online distance learning is a new norm in many institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Due to Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, many universities are implementing online distance learning as their tools in teaching and learning as a new learning environment. This study used quantitative method with primary data through questionnaires distributed to 373 samples of students in UiTM Pahang. The Pearson correlation coefficient test is used to indicate the major variable contribute towards readiness among respondents. Meanwhile, multi regression test is used to found out the most attitude influence the readiness of online distance learning. It is found that attitude towards classroom interaction is the major variable among respondents in order to be ready for online distance learning. Respondents prefer to have interaction in the classroom first before they begin with online distance learning. Meanwhile, researchers also found that attitude towards online learning significantly contribute to the prediction of student's readiness. Students attitude really give a major impact towards the readiness of online distance learning. This study also provides a descriptive picture for the universities on the attitude and expectation of students towards readiness of online distance learning.

Keywords: Online distance learning (ODL), students' readiness, student's attitudes

1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a recent outbreak of the virus from Wuhan, China. The COVID-19 quickly expanded across the globe, over-reaching health systems, and intensifying with shelter containment. Global disease outbreaks such as Middle East Respiratory Coronavirus Syndrome (MERS-CoV) from Saudi Arabia, Influenza A (H1N1) from Spain, Henipavirus (Nipah) from China, and Extreme Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) raise the estimates of death rates. In early 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia recorded positive carrier statistics rising regularly that force government action to enforce movement control order (MCO); thus, Malaysians stay at home to stop the virus from spreading rapidly. The MCO affects undergraduate students who prefer to stay at home but are pursuing learning activities using the form of online distance learning (ODL).

Limited research is carried out on ODL due to disease outbreak that generates spark panic and fear as it forces current semester students to complete their research and new teaching method that is rarely implemented during 'peace situation.' Most of the ODL research was oriented by the essence of ODL's study program or syllabus mode; organized, well-planned class operation, and controlled for academic quality purposes. Also, several researchers have found that ODL has brought advantages in

teaching and learning compared to the conventional face-to-face process. However, future researcher needs to consider the ODL method chosen by the university as a result of disease outbreak and findings that are carried out unexpectedly and urged standard procedure (SOP) for ODL.

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit almost every country in the world has had a drastic impact on human life. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) source, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected 1.5 billion students from more than 165 countries worldwide (Shin, 2020). This phenomenon is also affecting the learning system in the country when the government took steps to close normal learning operations in all educational institutions including university nationwide to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus during the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO). In this situation, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) expressed its commitment so that the learning process of university students is not disrupted by allowing lecturers to perform tasks from home.

Based on the guidelines for the implementation of teaching and learning during the MCO issued by the MOHE, the lecturers' plan, prepare and deliver learning using appropriate communication and application medium to university students in their respective homes (MOHE, 2020). In this context, lecturers can implement teaching according to creativity by the concept of online distance learning (ODL). Accordingly, this study was conducted to identify the readiness of university students to online distance learning (ODL) methods during the implementation of MCO.

The conceptual meaning of distance education specified that in the lecture session, the teaching method occurs when students completed their research from anywhere but not always physically come. In other words, a student reads, studies, and completes online learning in their registered courses without having to attend any physical classes like a lecture hall, computer lab, library, or other physical classes. According to Zhang and Kenny (2010), the majority of distance education today makes full use of the internet network and easy access for the vast majority of students either via laptops or cell phones (Hussin, Manap, Amir, & Krish, 2017) or at home.

The term online distance learning is often used interchangeably with terms such as e-learning, mixed learning, online learning, and virtual learning, with the key concept being that studying informally, using any Internet resources, and having little to no physical social contact with lecturers (Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2014; Deschacht & Goeman, 2015; Keis, Catch, Schneider, & Ochs, 2015). Besides, these teaching technique techniques are used to deliver the content of the course by teleconferencing (Bhat, Raju, Bikramjit, & Souza, 2018), online chatting or forum, interactive video, and audio recordings. Students are expected to have a secure Internet network access, workable hardware, and a high degree of online learning preparation through the use of online teaching material delivery. The student must have computer and Internet awareness, self-directed learning, and high-level learning motivation to complete their research (El-Seoud, El-Khouly, & Taj-Eddin, 2016; Hernandez-Selles, Munoz-Carril, & Gonzalez-Sanmamed, 2019) as the most relevant factors to remember for ODL methods.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Distance Learning

Online distance learning (ODL) is a teaching method that does not require university students to be located with the lecturer where students learn alone, not face-to-face and away from the lecturer, and the learning process is controlled by the students themselves. In conclusion, students learn at their own pace at home. Therefore, Keegan (1980) mentioned various terminology used with this kind of learning concepts such as correspondent learning, home study, and distance learning but have almost the same concept. The term online distance learning (ODL) was first adopted at the 12th international conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) in Vancouver, Canada in 1982 and later changed to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE). A study by Rahim (2018) concluded that the term online distance learning (ODL) was used after 1973. According to Holmberg (1995), indications of online distance learning (ODL) has been offered since 1728 in Boston, USA.

In Malaysia, the concept of implementing online distance learning (ODL) began to be pioneered at the institute of higher learning (IPT) level. According to Dzakiria, Idrus, and Atan (2005), the earliest university to implement online distance learning (ODL) was Universiti Sains Malaysia which started

offering external degrees in 1971 and then continued to grow when several public and private universities took the same steps. Currently, more and more IPTA and IPTS are implementing online distance learning (ODL) at various levels of study using technological facilities as an interactive learning medium. At the mainstream school level, the concept of online distance learning (ODL) in Malaysia was first introduced through postal style learning led by Maktab Adabi Gaya Pos which was established in 1972 which later ended its operations in 1999 (Zakaria, 2017).

Through the seventh shift in the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025, it has been stated in the agenda to transform the education system by providing internet access through virtual learning. To realize this agenda, the government through MOHE created the Frog Virtual Learning Environment (Frog VLE) which is not only used by lecturers and students but also by administrators and parents (Phoong, Phoong, & Phoong, 2020). However, the study of Shahaimi and Khalid (2015) found that this virtual learning medium is less popular among lecturers due to a lack of knowledge and skills to handle teaching and learning based on technology. Mohiddin and Khalid (2014) also found that only 2 percent of lecturers use Frog VLE in teaching and learning.

In the context of education today, the development of online distance learning (ODL) empowered by great technological capabilities as well as supported by digital power and computing has successfully challenged the education system conventionally. Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2009) also acknowledged that technological developments with the evolution of the internet have challenged traditional learning concepts and theories, especially the routine learning of face-to-face lecturers with students in the classroom. In fact, at the moment, many learning materials can be easily accessed by anyone in the learning management system (LMS) according to the university platform. These learning materials make it easy for lecturers to implement online distance learning (ODL).

Therefore, these changes require lecturers to be friendly with technology because it will facilitate the implementation of the learning process if they have good skills in this field. According to Johnson, Jacovina, Russell, and Soto (2016), lecturers are incapable of resisting technological advances and at the same time, they cannot run away from this development. The changing world of the effects of technological advancement should not be used as a threat but should be faced with a positive attitude. Lectures need to master and adapt these new skills as to always be relevant to every pattern of change in the current education system.

2.2 Student readiness for Online Distance Learning (ODL)

In line with the recent development of online distance learning (ODL) which is moving rapidly with technological advances driven by digital power, students living in urban areas have the advantage of having a smooth internet network. According to Karim (2020), the internet distribution gap between urban and rural areas is still at a very large rate of 70:30. This huge digital divide has left students in rural and remote areas marginalized from enjoying virtual learning materials that should be able to help with online distance learning (ODL) at home. Hence, it is quite hard for some underprivileged students especially those with poor internet connections because they need stable internet connections to participate in online learning effectively. The biggest challenge faced by the respondents during online learning is internet connectivity. Internet connectivity is the first rank in challenges faced by the respondents. This is a pressing respondent especially for those in rural areas with weakest internet connectivity (Chung, 2020). The students in sub-rural and rural areas are not able to complete the task listed in ODL activities independently without physical discussion with friends and lecturers (Ajmal & Ahmad, 2019) and the students lack motivation to complete study as they face interruption and difficulties at home.

In the context on the implementation of teaching and learning during MCO, MOHE has outlined several rulings as a guide for lecturers. The first method proposed is online learning where lecturers can use a variety of appropriate learning platforms. MOHE also provides links to Google Classroom and Microsoft Team to make it easier for lecturers to teach online. Through these links, lecturers can easily access digital textbooks, various teaching, and learning videos, and interactive learning links such as Kahoot. MOHE also realizes that not all students can participate in virtual learning due to limited internet coverage, especially students living in rural and remote areas. Therefore, the guidelines provided also outline the alternative of the second learning method that lecturers can instruct students to implement learning activities using textbooks without leaving home (MOHE, 2020).

According to Adams, Sumintono, Mohamed, and Noor (2018), the level of readiness of e-learning in higher education institutes as learning tools are at a satisfactory level. This is because the implementation and development of the MSC in Malaysia in 1999 has created a network facility for the use of computers and multimedia cheaper, easier, and faster. It creates facilities for most higher education institutions to develop and provide facilities to students while realizing the goal of becoming a developed country. Referring to some studies conducted, it clearly shows that the effect of the use and ability of students in optimizing the advantages of technology in higher education institutes is very encouraging. If this style of learning continues, e-learning will be among the main catalysts of the education system in the years to come. In conclusion, e-learning is the delivery of education or training through the Internet using a computer. The scope of its use extends beyond the concept of computer or multimedia learning that was often discussed a long time ago. Through e-learning methods, learning, critical, and creative thinking can occur effectively. This is in line with the wishes of the Malaysian government in the Ninth Malaysia Plan which wants to develop the economy through e-economy and become an electronics-based economy.

Student's satisfaction refers to a short-term attitude, resulting from an evaluation of a student's educational experiences. Elliot and Shin defined student's satisfaction as a disposition by the subjective evaluation of educational outcomes and experiences (Weerasinghe et al., 2017). With the pandemic outbreak, the students have no choice but to embrace the new norm today. They have to be ready to get new input from the lecturers via online classes and communicate with their colleagues. A full force ODL is still fairly new and for students to accept it in a short notice has left them bewildered and unprepared even though blended learning mode has been compulsory for all courses in UiTM since 2013 (Kechil et al., 2017). There are several aspects that the students need to get ready which are the internet coverage, the motivation and willingness to learn, and technology-based skill. On the bright side, this new norm will encourage them to be more independent in getting knowledge as they are the millennials who are currently live in Industrial Revolution 4.0 era where the digitization and automation is the main focus. Apart from that, having computer skill is a must these days as many of the multinational conglomerate companies requires their potential employees to have this skill at the basic level.

Last but not least, online interaction also plays the vital aspect for online distance learning. Harris et al. (2009) suggested that interaction and discussion are important aspects in the learning process; thus, it should be incorporated into a blended learning environment. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) proposed online interaction to be carried out in the form of open dialogue or critical debate through an asynchronous Web-based discussion forum and so on. De L'Etraz (2010) reported that blended learning provides a seamless collaboration platform for group-based learning. Moreover, in an extensive study done by Yilmaz (2017), he found close correlation between student's e-learning readiness and motivation in e-learning. His findings indicate that the higher motivation the students have towards e-learning, they have better self-directed learning skills and become more satisfied with the courses. In addition, encouraging online interactions between teacher and student as well as student and student has been reported to contribute in motivating students to participate in ODL.

3. Methodology

This study was a cross-sectional study, conducted in UiTM Pahang Branch Jengka Campus with 373 students. A convenience sampling technique was used in collecting data from the respondents. As for the data collection, 34 items of instrument were used to measure both students' attitude and readiness towards online distance learning. Section A described demographic background of the respondents; Section B was on students' attitudes while Section C designated to explain readiness for online distance learning. Both Section B and C were in Likert-type scales; specifically, a 5-point Likert scale questions explaining level of agreement and satisfaction respectively. The scale was presented with values of 1=strongly disagree/dissatisfied, 2=disagree/dissatisfied, 3=neutral, 4=agree/satisfied and 5=strongly agree/satisfied. This instrument was distributed to the students via online form.

4. Findings and Discussions

Table 1 shows the distribution of the respondents who participated in this research. This research was conducted on UiTM Pahang students while they were being locked down at home during the pandemic's movement restriction order (MCO). Based on the table shown, 45.3% of the respondents came from students of semester 4 which contributed 169 respondents out of 373. The table also indicates that 275 respondents which represented 74% of the respondents were diploma students. The rest were degree students. About 264 respondents were from BA118 that contributed 71% of all respondents. The least program with respondents answering the questionnaire was EC110, AS255, BA119, and AT110 which each of the program only came out with 1 respondent for this research.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Construct	Description	Frequency	Percent
Semester	Semester 1	39	10.5
	Semester 2	98	26.3
	Semester 3	11	2.9
	Semester 4	169	45.3
	Semester 5	53	14.2
	Semester 6	3	.8
Level of study	Diploma	275	73.7
	Bachelor's Degree	98	26.3
Programme Code	BA/BM118	264	70.8
	BA/BM232	82	22.0
	AS120	8	2.1
	EC110	1	.3
	AS203	6	1.6
	AS255	1	.3
	AS247	2	.5
	BA119	1	.3
	AS201	3	.8
	AT110	1	.3
	SR243	4	1.1

Table 2 shows the attitude of students towards six learning aspects. Based on the table, it is clear that attitude toward classroom interaction has been a major variable chosen by the respondents with 4.23 compared to other aspects in the study. The lowest is attitude towards distance learning which was only 2.89. This shows that the students still feel somewhat awkward to the new learning style as they have to face so many changes compared to the normal learning environment as they used to.

Table 2: Attitude towards Online Distance Learning

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attitude towards learning flexibility	3.76	.696
Attitude towards online learning	2.89	.697
Attitude towards study management	3.01	.910
Attitude towards technology	3.25	.800
Attitude towards classroom interaction	4.23	.660
Attitudes towards online interaction	3.14	.737

Table 3 illustrates the relationship between student's attitudes and readiness for online distance learning. The analysis was performed using Pearson product-moment correlation. Based on Table 3, it was found that attitudes towards online learning and attitudes towards online interaction showed moderate positive relationship with readiness for online distance learning.

Table 3: Correlation analysis between student's attitudes and readiness for online distance learning

		LF	OL	SM	TE	CL	OI
OL	Pearson Correlation	.036					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.487					
SM	Pearson Correlation	-.062	.722**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.230	.000				
TE	Pearson Correlation	.069	.524**	.648**			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.184	.000	.000			
CL	Pearson Correlation	.250**	-.552**	-.456**	-.298**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		
OI	Pearson Correlation	-.013	.670**	.765**	.709**	-.422**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.799	.000	.000	.000	.000	
ODL	Pearson Correlation	.099	.547**	.489**	.435**	-.274**	.539**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.056	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Notes**

LF - Attitude towards learning flexibility
OL - Attitude towards online learning
SM - Attitude towards study management
TE - Attitude towards technology
CL - Attitude towards classroom interaction
OI - Attitudes towards online interaction
ODL - Readiness for Online Distance Learning

Table 4 shows the multiple regression analysis between student's attitude and readiness for online distance learning. As it is, the result indicates that R square for the regression was at .36 where all independent variables such as attitude of students towards learning flexibility, attitude towards online learning, attitude toward study management, attitude towards technology, attitude towards classroom interaction, and attitude toward online interaction explained 36% of the variance (R square) in students' attitudes with Sig. of F value of .000.

Besides, the value for Durbin Watson was 1.96 which is in the range of 1.5 to 2 as one of the assumptions for bivariate and multivariate correlation analysis. From the result of this analysis, the researchers found that attitude towards online learning was the most influential factor of student's readiness towards online distance learning ($p<.001$. $\beta= .37$). Therefore, the finding from this analysis indicated that attitude towards online learning significantly contributes to the prediction of student's readiness. Collinearity statistics indicated that the result met the requirement for hierarchical regression with value of VIF<10, Tolerance >.1.

Table 4: Multiple Regression between Students Attitudes and Readiness for Online Distance Learning

Independent variable	**Dependent variable (Readiness for Online Distance Learning)**			
	Standardized Coefficients Beta	**Significant value**	**Collinearity Statistic**	
			Tolerance	**VIF**
Attitude towards learning flexibility	.081	.072	.87	1.15
Attitude towards online learning	.337	.000	.37	2.66
Attitude towards study management	.025	.736	.31	3.19
Attitude towards technology	.055	.368	.46	2.16
Attitude towards classroom interaction	.032	.552	.61	1.61
Attitude towards online interaction	.273	.000	.31	3.16
R square			.36	
F			34.894	
Sig. of F value			.000	
Durbin Watson			1.96	

5. Discussion

Understanding the attitude of students towards different learning aspects can be critical for the assessment of their adaptability and eventual readiness of online distance learning. The findings show that students who have positive attitude toward classroom interaction are more likely to adapt to online distance learning. In addition, the results on attitude towards online learning and attitude towards online interaction showed moderate positive relationship with readiness for online distance learning. This finding was similar to previous research done by Adams et al. (2018) who found that students were ready for online distance learning. It can be concluded that classroom interaction plays a vital aspect for students' readiness in online distance learning. They believe if they communicate more with their friends and lecturers, they can cope with the online distance learning. The more positive the attitude, the more adaptable the students will be and the more ready they are for online distance learning. This finding is also supported by Yilmaz (2017). The researcher believes that encouraging online interactions between teacher and student as well as student and student has been reported to contribute well in motivating students to participate in ODL. The findings are congruent with extant literature (Harris et al., 2009; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; De L'Etraz, 2010).

Moreover, the findings show that students who have positive attitude towards learning flexibility, attitude towards online learning, attitude toward study management, attitude towards technology, attitude towards classroom interaction, and attitude toward online interaction are more likely to adapt into online distance learning. On the other hand, this result agrees with Ahmad and Raba (2016) who revealed that there is a general positive attitude towards distance learning. The majority of students found themselves more comfortable in distance learning than traditional learning and they also found that distance learning is more efficient than traditional learning. In an online distance learning environment, students benefit from flexibility in time and place as well as accessibility. Students enjoy greater autonomy over their learning progress and take greater responsibility for their studies. Students who are self-disciplined can advance at their own learning pace, and they tend to be high grade achievers (Owston et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2012). Active participation, which gives students a feeling of stronger engagement and a perception of better learning quality, is the key for students to perform well in online distance learning courses (Owston et al., 2013).

6. Conclusion

Majority of the students in UiTM Pahang Campus stated that they still feel awkward and difficult in adapting the new norm of learning style which focuses on online distance learning. The respondents consist of 74% Diploma students while the rest are Degree students. Respondents believe that attitude toward classroom interaction is a major variable that contributes towards readiness of online distance learning. Classroom interaction can provide students with more clarification and explanation regarding the topic or assignment. Hence, the respondents are able to answer any hassle immediately and accurately. Moreover, the respondents stated that they need to have interaction in classroom in order to be ready towards online distance learning. Meanwhile, the findings of the research also show that attitude towards online learning is the most influential factor on students' readiness towards online distance learning. About 60.1% of the respondents showed that learning through collaboration with others face-to-face is more productive. Consequently, almost 50% of respondents stated that learning is better through lecture-directed classroom-based activities and they feel sense of community when they are able to meet others in the classroom. Hence, 52.8% of respondents stated that they feel much better when someone guides them personally. Based on the findings of the research, we can identify that the attitude of the respondent's itself has given an impact towards the readiness on online distance learning. This is because they are used to their normal learning environment and routine.

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