

COVID-19 Academic Challenges

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When the COVID-19 outbreak struck in early March 2020, the Malaysian government took a risky move to close all sectors. The higher education institution was nonexceptional. Educators were instructed to switch to fully online distance learning (ODL). There were various responses to this decision but most educators rooted in one idea that the knowledge impartment must sustain. The educational system was on the verge of starting over the traditional approach but compelled back to online teaching and learning. This prolonged online distance learning costs educators and students to struggle to adapt to the education mode, assessments, and emotions.

Changing mode

One of the challenges that educators face is in familiarising themselves with online distance learning. Online teaching and learning are not something new to higher institutions but making it a full-time implementation requires time, cost and effort. Educators are constantly sent or volunteer to attend online teaching-related training to equip them with current situations better. Educators' greatest fears are the incapability of handling online classes and enquiries on the medium's effectiveness besides the lack of students' feedback during the online course. Teaching languages like English, for instance, considers the impact of virtual teaching on students' proficiency, especially reading, writing, listening and speaking (Kuruppannan & Muhammad, 2020). Due to this, educators need to probe into various absorbing mediums to engage with different proficiency levels. Academics also have to invest in experimenting with multiple means of teaching to encourage students' participation and interest in online learning. Some of the applications include Kahoot, Quizizz, Edpuzzle and so on. All these efforts require significant consideration in offering the best learning chances for the students (Othman et al., 2020).



Simultaneously, students prepare themselves to be ready for the new mode of learning. However, finding suitable and affordable devices to continue learning is proven easier said than done as most students do not have incomes. Moreover, they still expect the information to be provided by the educators and that educators offer prompt responses. The prominent restrictions in adopting online learning are the accessibility of wifi and data quota packages for each student who economically and monetarily constrained or those in places with poor internet connections (Wargadinata et al., 2020). Students also face their own hard time, especially in coping with the topics that are better learned face-to-face.

Shifting Assessments and Evaluations

To cater for the drastic changes in teaching and learning, educators need to contemplate using numerous mediums to test or assess students. From rigorous and reliable assessments, educators have to find out the convenient yet appropriate alternatives to students. Some universities even never experienced online examinations before, forcing instructors to start over from scratch. Preparing the assessments is one issue, and conducting it will be another. This process has flickered debates among higher institution educators on the integrity and measures of completing the evaluations (Nasri et al., 2020). The present situation coerces educators to come up with several sets of assessments to avoid cheating and plagiarism. Besides, instructors are responsible for creating a suitable evaluating environment where students will experience developing and applying the knowledge they have learned in the online distance classroom.

Even there are positive responses from students relating to the switch from face-to-face to virtual learning, there are still many students who have difficulties accepting the shift in assessments. Internet connection is one of the relatable issues students deal with in online tests or examinations. Students tend to have technical issues, particularly during the live assessment, leading to assessment completion and submission failure. Resubmission or redo of evaluations due to internet failure can cause students to lose focus and interest. Also, during this pandemic, students demand a clear decision and instruction on the assessment and examination they take. As Hasan and Bao (2020) explain, this is due to fear of losing a year of academic, and students are anxious over the preparation they have to make. However, Malaysian students are not alone in facing this problem. Most nations have substantial technical infrastructure challenges, especially in rural regions; thus, the quality of online education may be a severe issue that requires immediate attention (Shahzad et al., 2020).

Psychological Issues

Based on Mental Health Research Canada, it was found that the anxiety level among educators has increased from five to 25 per cent due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Raj, 2021). One factor that drives academics to anxiety is the overwhelming messages and emails from students and administration regardless of time. Regulating the new norm in teaching, technology and other responsibilities at home is not easy. There are times that educators confront rough situations like fear of making mistakes in front of a live streaming class. Although instructors express despair and anger over the current scenario, teaching and learning activities must continue since students are their principal customers (Tajuddin et al., 2021). Additionally, creating lesson plans is no longer effortless, while teaching is more demanding, and the preparation is time-consuming. The internet connectivity is another problem, which requires them to have backup plans, which means more time for arrangement. These accumulated factors cause rising worry, fatigue and distress, urging many to consider resigning and contemplating suicide or self-harm (The Star, 2021).

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysian students experience plenty of emotional predicaments. Some students come from large families and stay in thronged and loud surroundings. They have to share the devices and internet data with other siblings and even prioritise the young ones. The insufficient fund to continue paying for the internet data, especially when students do not have any loan or scholarship, is another causal aspect. In addition, they have to deal with a rapid transformation of study culture that is highly independent and alone. According to Al-Kumaim et al. (2021), all these contribute to high stress and poor mental health. Not only that, online distance learning does not own the common practice that the traditional classrooms offer; physical meetings, direct teacher-student classroom interaction and student-student communication. The competitive learning environment can solely be experienced in an actual learning classroom (Shahzad et al. 2020), leading students to lack motivation and high depression.

In conclusion, there are three main issues educators and students face due to online distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely psychological problems, assessment and evaluation, and adapting to the new mode of teaching and learning. Teachers can consider sharing teaching materials and discussing suitable approach with fellow academics to cope with these difficulties. Furthermore, both instructors and students must seek help when it comes to psychological issues because only they can notice their mental changes. Also, universities play a huge role in assisting students and staff in coping with anxiety by providing psychological services (Sundarasan et al., 2020). With these, academics and students can be more productive and positive in teaching and learning.

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