The Birth of ODL in Malaysia: An Investigation of Students' Perceptions

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Abstract— The infectious Coronavirus (COVID-19) which originated from China, has quickly evolved into a worrying worldwide health hazard, prompting most countries to impose mobility restrictions as a preventative precaution. Many people, especially university students, have been affected by Malaysia's implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020, as face-to-face (FTF) classroom learning is no longer allowed. The traditional learning process, i.e. FTF has been abruptly replaced by virtual learning, also known as Open Distance Learning (ODL), resulting in both barriers and opportunities. Instructors were free to experiment with numerous types of online learning systems due to this abrupt deployment of MCO, which has presented students with some challenging conundrums. As a result, this article investigates the perceptions and experiences of students at a public university in Malaysia dealing with online learning during this moment of global emergency. The data was gathered through video recordings based on an interview protocol. The findings depict that despite experiencing ODL for the first time, the students are optimistic about it as they managed to go through it with minimal stress. ODL has somehow become the new norm, and both instructors and students will continue to use it during this unprecedented COVID-19 endemic.
Keywords—COVID-19, E-learning, MCO, ODL, Online learning

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered unprecedented, and the sudden change of norms has significantly affected our way of life, requiring a number of attitudinal modifications. Education is one of the sectors experiencing significant fallout when the students were forced to stay home and learn online as part of their new norms (Ratten, 2020). Given that this virus is deadly and how vulnerable the settings of schools and universities can be, students are not allowed to be on the premises and do their conventional learning. To curb the spread of COVID-19, Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO) came into force on March 18, 2020, and all sectors were ordered to cease operation. The implementation falls under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967. It limits human activities and daily transactions with strict guidelines and regulations due to the devastating nature of the virus. There are several levels of MCO (March - August 2020), but despite the efficacy, our economy was severely affected, and many sectors required urgent attention, including our education system. The students and instructors were progressively ordered to participate in online learning by making full use of various appropriate platforms.

Online learning provides easy access for learners to explore their educational content regardless of location. Both instructors and students can exploit a plethora of media, websites, as well as online teaching platforms to replace their physical existence in classes (Paudyal, 2020). Because of this convenience, the education sector is predicted to succeed at delivery due to the vast repositories these websites and platforms can provide in ensuring the success of online learning.

A. Problem statement

As soon as the MCO was imposed, all academic institutions (kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities) were closed. This was because Malaysia topped the number of COVID-19 infections in Southeast Asia, reaching 428 cases as of March 15, 2020 (Kamaludin et al., 2020). With this abrupt announcement, many university students could not get home and had to stay in their residential colleges. However, attending online learning became a problem not only for the stranded students but also for those at home with their families. Low or no Internet connection hindered the students from accessing their learning content at home, which added more psychological pressure to those affected.

A stir of panic was also experienced by the instructors who had to jump on the bandwagon of preparing online teaching materials. Setting up materials online involves a few crucial processes like creating the content and restructuring the

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existing documents and information to suit the university's requirements and students' Internet connectivity. Thus, this study aimed to delve into the university students' perceptions of pursuing their studies online in an emergency outbreak like the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on an interview protocol, the students were free to express themselves on the positive and negative aspects of open and distance learning (ODL) they have experienced. The ODL practice was considered new to the Malaysian education system at the time of writing this paper. Therefore, we analyzed this issue because few studies were yet to clarify the students' readiness in ODL.

B. Research objective

The unexpected transformation of learning methods from attending physical classes to online learning has posed significant restrictions, particularly for students. Thus, as the objective of this study, we would like to investigate university students' general perceptions of the new norm of ODL.

C. Research question

This study poses one (1) research question:
What are the general perceptions of university students towards the new norm of ODL?

D. Significance of the study

Understanding that COVID-19 is unprecedented and ODL has never been comprehensively practiced in the selected public university, barriers are expected to occur. Dhawan (2020) described this sudden shift as necessary and inevitable as it determines our education quality. Based on this notion, it is vital to investigate if our students are ready to adopt the changes and the quality they can put into their learning performance and achievements. Thus, this study is considered necessary to discover a new set of perceptions and experiences faced by these university students. The findings would help us understand the outcome of this new educational practice at the tertiary level in Malaysia.

E. Limitation of the study

Around 6368 students in the public university had to face this brusque transition to ODL. However, since we used the convenient sampling method, only 70 were taken as participants. Therefore, the findings clearly could not generalize all the students' perceptions in imparting their online learning experiences during the global emergency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. COVID-19: The outbreak of an unprecedented global threat and the new norms

COVID-19 which was first discovered in Wuhan, China, quickly circled the world, and as reported by Wilder-Smith et al. (2020) more than 82,000 cases have been recorded, with more than 2,800 deaths approximately two months after its outbreak. As of November 3, 2020, Statista (2020) delineated more than 47 million confirmed cases by far, with more than 1.2 million deaths worldwide.

Templeton et al. (2020) argued that the facilitation process is still challenging despite knowing the advantages of the new norms and understanding how to abide by every restriction. They discovered that it is not easy for the public to alter their behaviours and practices, especially when they do it in isolation. To ensure the effectiveness of these new norms, it is necessary to avoid normative behaviours such as shaking hands and being in close physical contact with one another (Sajed & Amgain, 2020). In their study, the researchers quoted New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, that it is pivotal for everyone in the community to watch out for each other. Only by doing so the shared goals appear to be more lucid, and everybody will realize that they must embrace these new norms together.

B. COVID-19 implications on education

Social distancing has become one of the measures in countering the COVID-19 transmission. Siedner et al. (2020) reported a slight reduction of the mortality rate in America by 2.0% per day, proving the effectiveness of mobility restrictions. Many countries worldwide have also implemented both partial and complete lockdowns to mitigate the spread of the virus. While all educational premises had to be temporarily closed, this significantly impacted the education sector when most nations opted for the full swing of online learning (Ratten, 2020). UNESCO (2020) has identified that by April 6, 2020, a vast number of 1,576,021,818 students in 188 countries were affected at all levels of learning. Some institutions experienced a smooth transition, while others experienced a crisis-response migration due to the pandemic.

Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) stated that several students and educators took longer time to shift into the emergency remote teaching via Web 2.0 platforms in some developing countries. The drawbacks of this transition include the lack of facilities and Internet connectivity at home (Crawford, 2020). Poor Internet connection is the most notable limitation in ODL (Dhawan, 2020; Norazrina, 2020). Some students also highlighted that the lack of interactions with teachers and friends and the inability to experience the college lifestyle on campus are the limitations of ODL (UNESCO, 2020). In addition, Kamaludin et al. (2020) identified that approximately 30% of the respondents (university students) experienced minimal to extreme anxiety levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the challenges, online learning has provided numerous benefits to the education system. ODL could create a collaborative and interactive classroom environment where students can give prompt feedback, ask questions, and learn in a fun way (Dhawan 2020). Jamal et al. (2020) claimed that both students and instructors can explore a plethora of online learning tools that may enhance their technological skills. Paudyal (2020) also reported that online learning creates student-centred education and helps them to work more independently.

C. E-Learning and the birth of ODL in Malaysia

E-learning is an approach that emerged from distance learning and has received much attention from public

institutions in executing distance learning programmes (Goi & Ng, 2008). Many higher education institutions have developed portals as e-learning platforms to supplement traditional teaching methods or as a medium for long-distance programmes (Khalid et al., 2006, as cited in Goi & Ng, 2008). According to Asirvatham et al. (2005), the first university in Malaysia that established its Learning Management System (LMS) to support e-learning is the University of Malaya (UM). It was then followed by the Multimedia University (MMU), International Medical University (IMU) and Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) in 1999. Later, Open University Malaysia (OUM) offered e-learning courses in 2000. On December 1, 2005, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) implemented the university's first LMS known as the I-Learn portal (Norsaniah et al., 2012). The I-Learn portal enables learners and educators to experience e-learning activities whereby users can easily retrieve data related to UiTM courses such as students' information, course contents, course evaluation and feedback on I-Learn.

ODL and Blended Learning were introduced in the 2000s due to the establishment of more private universities and the emergence of the Internet (Loo, 2015). Rafizah et al. (2020) defined ODL as a teaching-learning activity that frees the learners from any time and place restrictions to provide full access to learning flexibility. In March 2013, the first Malaysian higher education institution - Taylor's University, announced the launch of a trial Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) programme, while in 2014, five more institutions: Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and Open University Malaysia (OUM) began delivering MOOCs on two different platforms (Mansor et al., 2015). Fast forward to April 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all educational institutions were forced to shift FTF classrooms to entirely online or ODL. During this critical period, university staff have undeniably shown resilience in supporting this new norm. Sharing sessions and webinars on basic networking methods, online test planning, and storage sharing technologies were held to help with the implementation process. The instructors have extensively exploited e-learning platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Webex, KAMI, Kahoot, Quizlet, Google Classroom, Google Meet, WhatsApp Messenger, Telegram, YouTube and Facebook (Jamal et al., 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research design

We employed a qualitative research method using an interview protocol that consists of two interview questions. The answers were recorded and submitted to the instructors via Google Classroom. The participants were asked to share their negative and positive perceptions of ODL during the first MCO in Malaysia (March - July 2020).

B. Participants

Seventy diploma students of a public university in Malaysia participated in this study: 19 males and 51 females aged between 18 to 20. The students were undertaking diploma courses from three programmes: Diploma in Pastry Arts, Diploma in Hotel Management and Diploma in Nursing.

C. Sampling method

The convenience sampling method was used in this study. The primary goal of convenience sampling is to collect data from readily accessible participants (Ilker et al., 2016). All participants were researchers' students of semester March to July 2020.

D. Research instrument

The instrument used in this study is video recording. It is proven to be an effective method in qualitative research (Penn-Edwards, 2004). Participants were asked to prepare a video containing their general perceptions on ODL. Prior to their recordings, researchers provided two questions to the students:
i. What positive elements in ODL have you experienced so far?
ii. What negative aspects in ODL seem to hinder your learning progress?

E. Data collection and analysis method

Data was collected through video recordings submitted by the participants on Google Classrooms. We gathered and categorized the data in table forms using qualitative descriptive analysis to identify the participants' positive and negative perceptions of ODL. Upon receiving the videos, researchers determined their responses by looking at the keywords mentioned in their video presentations based on the questions given before the recordings. Their responses were later compiled under two themes: positive and negative.

IV. RESULTS

o This section presents the findings based on the research question, as stated in the introduction. We have created two different tables and figures to represent the students' positive and negative perceptions of online learning's new norm, respectively.

o RQ: What are the general perceptions of university students towards the new norm of ODL?

A. Students' positive perceptions of ODL

Based on the students' responses in the videos, five main elements related to positive perceptions of ODL were identified. The main elements are flexible learning, autonomous learning, appropriate platforms and materials, familiarity with technology and low expenditure. The students also provided specific reasons and explanations for each positive element. The keywords were identified and data was tabulated as shown in Table 1.

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Table 1: Students' positive perceptions of ODL

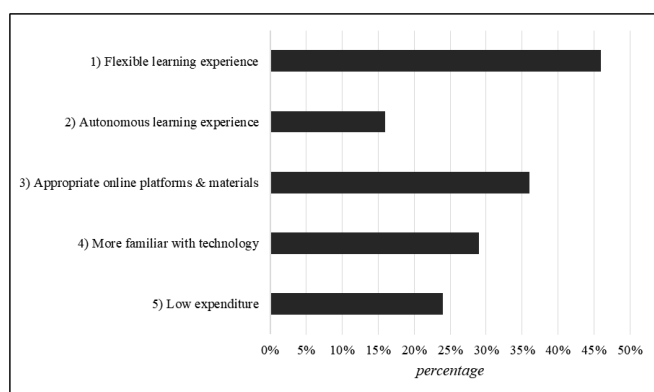| Students' Positive perceptions	No.of students & percentage
1) Flexible learning experience ● Freedom to learn ubiquitously ● Ability to spend time at home with family ● Extra time to prepare & complete the assignments	32 (46%)
2) Autonomous learning experience ● Promote independent learning ● Boost self-discipline & responsibility	11 (16%)
3) Appropriate online platforms & materials ● Easy access to learning materials ● Low usage of Internet data	25 (36%)
4) More familiar with technology ● Exploring IT/ new apps /E-learning platforms and websites	20 (29%)
5) Low expenditure ● Reduce expenses on printed materials/ accommodation/ transportation	15 (24%)

Fig. 1. Students' positive perceptions of ODL (summary)

Table 1 and Figure 1 portray the students' positive attitudes toward ODL. 46% of the students stated that ODL provides flexibility regarding location, time and readiness. Some of the participants mentioned that they could join their online classes ubiquitously. One of them clarified that she could still attend her online class despite being admitted to a hospital. ODL was also proven to offer flexibility since students could access the online notes or replay the recorded lectures as often as necessary. Besides that, online classes allowed more preparation time; thus, all task submissions were hardly overdue.

25 out of 70 (36%) participants affirmed that lecturers who selected online platforms and materials according to the students' preferences (WhatsApp, e-mail, Google Classroom and PDF forms that require low Internet bandwidth) have made the learning session less stressful. The consideration given by instructors could enhance students' motivation to learn online. It proves that ODL classes can be practical if appropriate online learning platforms and materials are utilized in the teaching strategy.

In the next category, 20 out of 70 (29%) participants explained that ODL is beneficial for the students to polish their technical skills such as searching for information, using online applications, and creating videos. The participants asserted that they could recognise various online learning

tools or Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Schoology, Microsoft Team and Canvas. Clearly, the exposure to these multiple platforms enabled them to identify the most convenient medium for online learning or ODL. Meanwhile, 24% of the participants mentioned that ODL helped them reduce their expenses on printed notes and assignments, transportation and accommodation. The primary reason was that they stayed home and did not spend on transportation or hostel fees. Lastly, 16% of the participants stated that ODL has successfully shaped them into independent learners. They could learn to look for information themselves and manage their time more efficiently to become more responsible learners.

B. Students' negative perceptions of ODL

Based on the videos, we have discovered four main aspects related to negative perceptions of ODL. The main negative aspects are distractions at home, poor Internet connection, outdated or incompatible devices and difficulties in carrying out discussions. The students also gave specific elaborations for each negative aspect of ODL. Table 2 displays the students' negative perceptions of ODL and the percentage of students who highlighted the aspect in their videos.

Table 2. Students' negative perceptions of ODL

| Students' Negative perceptions	No. of students & percentage
1. Distractions at home ● Household chores ● Family members' intrusion	12 (17%)
2. Poor Internet connection ● Rural areas ● Bad weather condition	28 (40%)
3. Outdated/ incompatible devices ● Limited access to learning materials and online classes	7 (10%)
4. Difficulties in doing discussion ● Lack of engagement with classmates/ instructors	10 (14%)
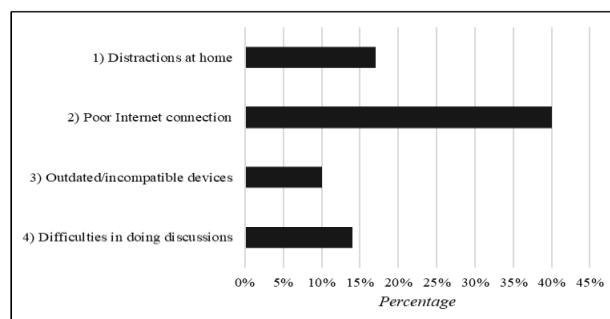
Fig. 2 Students' negative ODL experiences (summary)

The findings illustrated that the dominant issue of ODL is the poor Internet connection, and 40% of the participants verified this. As shown in Table 2, the main factors are the house location (mainly in rural areas) and the bad weather condition

(rainy days), which led to inaccessible online classes and late submissions of assignments. Based on the responses, some had to carry their devices and learning materials out of their homes to get better coverage or in the worst scenario they had to go on look for the available Wi-Fi connection nearby.

Distractions at home was another negative feedback provided by participants. 17% of the participants testified that the distractions were usually related to household chores and other family members' presence, contributing to backlogged assignments and a non-conducive learning environment. Difficulty participating in classroom discussions is another negative aspect of ODL, and 14% of the participants agreed. Some students hardly stayed online synchronously during the lectures (due to poor Internet connections). As a result, they barely engaged with their lecturers and classmates during online classes. Finally, 7% of the participants affirmed that incompatible and outdated devices were also part of their online learning barriers. They explained in the videos that most learning platforms required them to use laptops or computers, while some only used their mobile phones as their learning devices. Hence, some learning materials became inaccessible to them.

V. CONCLUSION

In this study, we have identified that the university students who experienced barriers to engaging in ODL mainly stay in remote areas. Getting a good Internet connection is considered the most common issue. According to Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), students' socioeconomic status significantly hinders them from having complete control of their devices and strong Internet accessibilities. Without this capacity, it is believed that students can easily fall behind in this era of online learning.

Although these complaints and challenges were substantially addressed, we have discovered that ODL provides tremendous benefits such as freedom in learning and easy access to learning materials. Istifci (2017) found that most students perceived online learning as encouraging and accommodating when the instructors used appropriate e-learning platforms with practical classroom activities. Norazrina (2020) also confirmed that students favour applications that require low Internet bandwidth, such as Google Classroom and WhatsApp Messenger and easily accessed resources such as pre-recorded videos and lecture slides. Thus, selecting relevant platforms and materials plays an essential role in ensuring the efficacy of ODL.

In conclusion, we could surmise that despite experiencing ODL for the first time, the students were primarily ready and managed to go through it with minimal stress. In this research, the percentage of students who confirmed the benefits of ODL outweighed those who addressed their common online learning hindrances. It is evident that these advantages have allowed users to unknowingly become more adept learners in enhancing their competency in technology and significantly improving their time management skills. By doing this for the first time, the users can continue their exploration to facilitate a more meaningful online learning experience in the foreseeable future.

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