

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ODL AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC: STUDENTS' CHALLENGES AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

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ABSTRACT

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, universities' main mode of teaching have transitioned from conventional face-to-face learning to Open Distance Learning (ODL). This sudden shift to online learning has posed a myriad of challenges to students such as individual related challenges, technical challenges and learning experience related challenges. Those who are enrolled in a high-demand ODL programme may be confronted with the additional challenge of balancing work, family, and studies. The current study aims to investigate the association between challenges faced by ODL learners and their emotional wellbeing. Using stratified sampling, 133 distance learning students were randomly selected from all faculties as study samples. A questionnaire was designed and distributed through an online survey. Findings from the study suggest that out of the three ODL challenges, individual-related challenges had the highest impact on students' emotional wellbeing during ODL. These findings are beneficial to the respective stakeholders, such as the top management, coordinators and counselors. With such information, various initiatives, measures, or policies could be introduced to improve the status quo (ODL) as well as to address emotional wellbeing issues delicately.

Keywords: ODL; pandemic; challenges; emotional; wellbeing

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 had a significant global impact on educators, students, and institutions (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). During the start of the pandemic, open distance learning (ODL) in Malaysian educational institutions began to replace traditional classroom learning in an effort to curb infections. UiTM campuses nationwide followed suit and shifted from conventional campus-centred learning to ODL approach. This shift was deemed ideal as online learning has long been a feature of global educational institutions, permitting students to learn without limits (Norazrina, 2020). The provision of flexible online education was conducted in real-time face-to-face (F2F) and offline interactions corresponding to students' timetables.

Research on the efficacy and merits of ODL has been varied. The classic F2F and revolutionary ODL teaching methodologies were distinguished in the literature review by Taylor et al. (2020). They have detailed ways to transition from a classic F2F to one where all delivery, resources, and support are provided remotely. To make this possible, an institution must be agile, identify important change advocates, and invest in the necessary technological

resources and personnel. According to Raihana et al. (2021), the primary factors that promote ODL are cooperation, communication, and the transfer of information. In addition, user-friendly and dependable technology is also required to enable a successful online learning experience. Marshall and Wolanskyj-Spinner (2020) further claim that if adequately managed, ODL can be just as good as, if not better than, classic teaching approaches. Fernando (2018) also argues that ODL may continue to be the most effective accelerator for enriching teaching and learning through innovative technology and pedagogies. In a similar vein, Arasaratnam & Northcote (2017) agree that ODL is a potential educational platform with zero restrictions by location or time constraint. Indeed, ODL could provide students generations with the necessary technological skills, making them more valuable candidates in the future job market.

Although research has consistently shown that ODL can be an effective medium for enriching learning, its efficacy is still debatable. In some instances, technology may not be smooth or trustworthy, distracting from the learning process. As Wu (2020) has argued, online courses lack "incidental opportunities" for physical interaction found in F2F classes. This lack has become a significant drawback for educators to evaluate students' progress and meet the requisite expectations and standards, particularly for assigned tasks. Students, on the other hand, may find it difficult because instructional information is not always responded to immediately. It is undeniably challenging for educators to know whether the online lectures and assignments are comprehensible in determining effective e-learning. Some students in remote districts with inadequate internet lines cannot fully experience ODL, particularly during scheduled live sessions. This issue is proven by previous findings in students facing technical challenges due to poor internet access and lack of technology devices (Kara, Erdogdu, Kokoc & Cagiltay, 2019; Adams, Sumintono, Mohamed & Nur Syafiq, 2018 and Aboderin, 2015). Although students are known as digital natives, many were confronted with physical distance obstacles in ODL that they had never anticipated before the pandemic.

Apart from technical challenges, students may also endure various pressures during their academic careers that may impact their mental health and academic performance. In this aspect, faculty leadership and teaching techniques, academic expectations, and availability of learning tools are key variables influencing their emotional wellbeing and academic success (Tharania et al., 2017). In this regard, it can be concluded that students' self-challenges may affect their emotional wellness, and it must not be underrated. Consistent with Kara et al. (2019), their impassiveness and less dedication to online learning led to low self-assurance. The lack of confidence made students feel stressed and less motivated (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh & Althunibat, 2020). In addition, the students' e-learning experience related challenges such as insufficient response time, uninteresting learning materials, and less active interaction between students-lecturers have significantly impacted the students' distant learning preferences (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Students with idealistic expectations may lose their study interest in confronting the increased workloads and learning loads while thriving in adopting the new digital learning forms (Oliver et al., 2018). The drastic change in students' e-learning styles might intensify their emotional struggles of feeling loneliness, stress, anxiety, burnout, and lead to depression due to the added loads.

Nabolsi et al. (2021) who investigated students' experiences within the framework of COVID-19 discovered four key themes. One of them was that The rapid shift from traditional F2F classroom to ODL was regarded as a significant adjustment that elicited various emotional responses. The majority of students are feeling nervous, agitated, bewildered, and defenceless in the face of this situation. On the first theme, they discussed completing tasks and dealing with ODL issues. ODL also elicited a number of problems those students handled. One of the most difficult challenges was learning about ODL independently. As a result, they discovered that students are grappling with available resources and skills in the second theme. On the third theme, ODL, when compared to traditional, exceeded the students' experience and expectations.

Long hours spent communicating with educators, on top of other ODL family obligations, were exhausting. Finally, according to the students, failure to meet the courses' objectives is attributable to several issues, including a lack of faculty preparedness, resources, and supervision. As a result, they offer a complete assessment of the importance of educating and training faculty to embrace and preserve ODL knowledge to ensure ODL's success. It also emphasises institutional and infrastructure ready to support the transition from traditional teaching and learning to ODL.

Students in ODL programmes confront additional obstacles since many of them must balance their duties as employees and obligations to family members. Faronbi et al. (2021) studied probable depression symptoms and coping mechanisms among ODL students to alleviate the difficulties. Consistent with these findings, most ODL students had mild to severe depression symptoms. This result is in line with Orzechowska et al. (2013), in their study of depression and ways of stress management; students with depression employ poor avoidance techniques to cope with stress more often than healthy controls, with depressive students focused on emotions and the urge to alleviate them. For this reason, the efficacy of ODL is a topic that is receiving a greater attention as it relates to student's stress and wellbeing. Despite numerous studies on ODL implementation, investigations on the relationship between challenges faced by ODL students and their mental wellbeing are limited. The current work aims to determine the challenges faced by university students during ODL by investigating the relationship between the students' challenges in ODL and their emotional wellbeing while experiencing ODL.

The purpose of this study is to look at the significant problems that may affect university students' emotional wellbeing while experiencing ODL during the pandemic. Moreover, the proposed variables of ODL challenges associated with technical, personal, and e-learning experiences that influence students' emotional wellbeing warrant a further investigation. Findings from this study may help educators better understand students' emotional wellbeing during ODL. It is hoped that this study will provide insightful evidence to educators and institutions in the relationship between the students' challenges in ODL and their emotional wellbeing experiencing ODL to accommodate distant learners with distinct learning needs during this pandemic.

2. Problem Statement

Virtual learning cannot replace in-person schooling due to shortcomings that were acknowledged by education experts. It has been found that more than 460 million students across the globe do not have access to the internet, computers or mobile devices to participate in virtual learning (Feuer, 2020). Additionally, during virtual learning, students have become more exposed to physical and emotional violence. The students' association from one of the renowned public universities in Malaysia has urged the university's management to minimize the students' workload and hope that more time can be given to students before the assignments are due (Ishak, 2021). Therefore, through the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), the government conducted a study on the effectiveness of ODL in enhancing the learning process. The ministry is concerned with the constraints, difficulties, and challenges facing students and lecturers during ODL. It was also mentioned that higher education is given the flexibility to conduct its teaching and learning activities online. Educators were also required to prepare plans according to the teaching needs by considering the current conditions (2021b). Considering the critical pandemic situation plaguing the nation, this study aims to see whether the challenges faced by students have a significant relationship with their emotional conditions while undergoing ODL. In this study, the challenges include individual related challenges, technical challenges, and learning experience related challenges. Addressing the challenges confronted

by students during this pandemic is crucial. According to the study conducted by the Ministry of Education, 36.9 percent of students do not have any devices to participate in ODL (Jalil, 2021). This is one of the challenges that need to be overcome, as hands-off efforts to address the digital divide among students may lead to huge educational gaps and dropouts. Therefore, this study determined the different challenges faced by students at university levels and how these challenges correlated with their emotional wellbeing while participating in experiencing ODL.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was developed using empirical data from available quantitative and qualitative research, comprehensive literature and also existing models and theories (Aboderin, 2015; Adams et al., 2018; Kara et al., 2019).

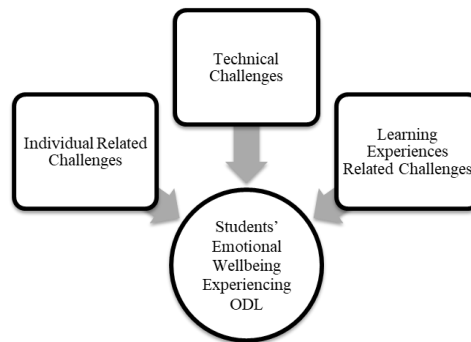


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework explicitly presents students' challenges during ODL as key factors influencing students' emotional wellbeing while experiencing ODL. Student's challenges are determined by individual related challenges, technical challenges, and challenges related to learning experiences. The relationship between student's challenges during ODL and their emotional condition is dynamically tested.

4. Method

4.1. Design

The study was predominantly quantitative as it attempted to explore the relationship between challenges faced by students during ODL and their emotional wellbeing. One week of duration was set aside for data collection via an online survey. The unit of analysis in this study is individual and the respondents will be randomly selected among three courses. The courses and the total number of students are:

Table 1: List of Courses for Bachelor Degree (Distance learning) UiTM Sabah Branch (March – July 2021)

Course	Number of Students
AM228	187
BA243	114
AC220	142
Total	433

4.2. Samples

The present work used a stratified sampling of 133 undergraduate students majoring in different fields of study. This technique is deemed suitable since there are only three programmes for degree (distance learning) students. The stratified sampling technique allows the researchers to acquire sample respondents that best represent the studied population. Students were stratified into groups (strata) based on the students' programme and were selected randomly within groups.

Table 2: Calculation for Each Courses

Course	Number of Students	Sample Calculation	Number of Sample
AM228	187	$\frac{187}{433} \times 133$	56
BA243	114	$\frac{114}{433} \times 133$	34
AC220	142	$\frac{142}{433} \times 133$	43
Total	433		133

4.3. Instrumentation

An online questionnaire was used to elicit information regarding students' challenges during ODL. Participants were given a week to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of four demographic questions (Gender, Programme, Part and Age) and 37 Likert scale questions.

Table 3: Likert Scale

Scale	Indicator
Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neutral	3
Agree	4
Totally Agree	5

5. Data Collection

Data were collected within a week via an online survey. A total of 133 questionnaires were distributed to the selected students from three faculties using Google form. The respondents were told to complete the questionnaire in ten minutes. Respondents were also assured that the findings concerning their responses would be treated with high confidentiality to respect individual opinions. After the questionnaires were gathered, the data was further analyzed.

6. Data Analysis

The data for the current work was analysed using SPSS Version 25. The factors contributing to the students' emotions during ODL were identified using the statistical method, which is the factor analysis method based on the Likert scale question. Then the factors are classified into three ODL challenges highlighted in the framework; Individual Related Challenges, Technical Challenges, and Learning Experience Challenges.

Descriptive analysis (Central tendency measurement and frequency table) was carried out in this study. The Central tendency measurement is used to describe the perception level of the students towards each of the factors contributing to the ODL challenges on average. Meanwhile, the frequency table was utilized to describe the percentages of students affected by each of the items in the questionnaire for identified factors. Multiple Linear Regression analyses the correlation between the Emotional Wellbeing experienced ODL with the three identified ODL challenges. A Pearson coefficient of correlation was also carried out to investigate the relationship between the students' emotional wellbeing during ODL and each of the ODL challenges.

7. Result

7.1. Respondents' demographic profile

This study involved 133 degree (distance learning) students. 72.9% of the 133 respondents were female, while 27.1% were male. 36.1% of the 97 female students are enrolled in a Bachelor of Accountancy, 36.1% are enrolled in a Bachelor of Administrative Science, and 27.8% are enrolled in a Bachelor of Business Administration. 22.2% of male students are Bachelor of Accountancy students, 58.3% are Bachelor of Administrative Science and 19.4% are Bachelor of Business Administration. Respondents' ages ranged from 21 to 45 years old and they were from various semesters.

7.2. Contributing factors to ODL challenges

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) was 0.915 (more than 0.6), and Bartlett's test had a significant p -value (0.000). All the 37 items in the questionnaire were included in the factor analysis since the Anti-image Correlation for each item was more than 0.5. Based on the principal component analysis, eight factors emerged. After identifying the Likert Scale questions suggested for factors 1 to 8, they were labelled as Emotional, Time management, Workload, Anxiety, Communication, Personal difficulties, Device problems, and Computer skills. The factors were then categorised into the ODL challenges listed in the Conceptual Framework (See Figure 1). Emotional and anxiety were classified into Students'

Emotional Wellbeing Experiencing ODL. Time management, communication, and personal problems are factors in Individual Related Challenges. Device problems and computer skills were classified as Technical Challenges. Workload under Learning Experience Related Challenges.

7.2.1. Students' emotional wellbeing during ODL

Two components contributed to students' emotional wellbeing during ODL: emotional and anxiety. Most students expressed their emotions and anxiety in stable conditions, where they did not agree or disagree with each statement related to their emotions and anxiety. However, the percentage of the affected students is still high. This was indicated in the findings where 36.1% of them have bad emotions during the ODL, while 50.4% reported that they get anxious when they start to worry about their safety and fear losing their loved ones.

7.2.2. Individual related challenges

Based on the principle component analysis, there are three components that can be classified as Individual Related Challenges. They are time management, communication, and personal problems. Overall, most students described their time management, communication, and personal problems during ODL as moderate.

On average, 42.1% of students could not manage their time properly during ODL, 27.2% had communication problems and 15.1% had personal problems.

7.2.3. Technical challenges

The device problems and computer skills are classified as Technical Challenges. Most students had moderate difficulties with devices and computer skills. On average, 21.1% of students had a device problem and 30.5% lacked computer skills.

7.2.4. Learning experience related challenges

Workload is classified under Learning Experience Related Challenges. On average, 62.4% of students can't handle the workload during the ODL.

7.3. Correlation between the emotional wellbeing during ODL and the ODL challenges (Individual related challenges, technical challenges, and learning experience challenges)

There were four variables in the analysis. One of the variables was a dependent variable, which was the students' emotional wellbeing during ODL. Since the students' emotional wellbeing during ODL depends on the Individual Related Challenges, Technical Challenges, and Learning Experience Related Challenges, it is called a dependent variable. The other three variables were independent. Among the three challenges, we wanted to see which of the three ODL challenges had the most significant influence on the students' emotional wellbeing during ODL. The data for all variables were collected using a Likert scale question and the mean score for each variable was generated by using SPSS Version 25. The reliability of the items for each variable was tested and Cronbach's alpha can be seen in Table 4. The Cronbach's alpha values were all above 0.7 suggesting that they were reliable.

Table 4: Cronbach's alpha

No.	Variable	Cronbach's alpha
1	Students' Emotional Wellbeing during ODL (\hat{Y})	0.959
2	Individual Related Challenges (X_1)	0.872
3	Technical Challenges (X_2)	0.716
4	Learning Experience Related Challenges (X_3)	0.864

The Pearson Coefficient of Correlation values and the coefficient of determination are 0.775 and 0.601, respectively. There is a strong positive linear relationship between the students' emotional wellbeing during ODL and the ODL challenges. 60.1 % of the total variation in students' emotional wellbeing during ODL was explained by the Individual Related Challenges, Technical Challenges, and Learning Experience Related Challenges, and the relationships were highly significant (p -value 0.000). Another 39.9% of the total variation could be explained by other factors. The Multiple Linear Regression equation: $\hat{Y} = 0.15 + 0.85X_1 + 0.082X_2 + 0.035X_3$.

The examination of the t -values shows that only Individual Related Challenges was a significant predictor of students' emotional wellbeing, since the t -value for the other predictors was nonsignificant ($p > 0.05$). By using stepwise regression, the value of the Pearson Coefficient of Correlation and the coefficient of determination were 0.775 and 0.601 respectively when the insignificant predictor was removed automatically.

However, by using hierarchical regression analysis, the result shows that the two insignificant predictors became significant predictors when only Technical Challenges and Learning Experience Related Challenges were entered into the regression equation. Technical Challenges and Learning Experience Related Challenges were significantly correlated with students' emotional wellbeing. We can conclude that Technical Challenges and Learning Experience Related Challenges on their own are a significant predictor of students' emotional wellbeing, $p < 0.05$.

Further analysis investigated the correlation between the students' emotional wellbeing during ODL and each challenge. Table 5 presents the correlation results between students' emotional wellbeing during ODL and the challenges they faced. All the p -values exceeded the significance level of 5%, indicating a significant relationship. The previous conclusion supports that Technical Challenges and Learning Experience Related Challenges, on their own, are a significant predictor of students' emotional wellbeing.

Table 5: Correlation between the Student's Emotional Wellbeing during ODL with each challenges

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Pearson coefficient of correlation	p -value
Students' Emotional Wellbeing during ODL	Individual Related Challenges	0.733	0.000
Students' Emotional Wellbeing during ODL	Technical Challenges	0.478	0.000
Students' Emotional Wellbeing during ODL	Learning Experiences Related Challenges	0.508	0.000

8. Discussion

The present work was conducted to investigate the association between challenges faced by ODL learners and their emotional wellbeing. Based on the students' challenges and emotional

conditions upon the implementation of Open Distance Learning during the Pandemic Covid19 questionnaire, three main findings emerged.

Firstly, it was discovered by factor analysis that emotional, time management, workload, anxiety, communication, personal difficulties, device problems, and computer skills are the eight factors that contribute to the ODL challenges. Among the eight factors identified, workload appeared to be the factor that has the most impact on students' emotions. During ODL, the majority of students complained about having too many assignments to complete. Some students are still unfamiliar with the e-learning process and struggle with completing all the assignments individually after the work has been divided. Additionally, they also must be able to comprehend the video lectures or lesson videos on YouTube on their own. The eight factors were then classified into three ODL challenges: Individual Related Challenges, Technical Challenges, and Learning Experience Related Challenges.

Secondly, it was found that the Individual Related Challenges had the highest impact on students' emotional wellness during ODL. The emotional wellbeing of students during ODL and Individual Related Challenges have a strong positive linear relationship. This suggests that if the Individual Related Challenges increase, the students' emotional wellness during ODL will decline. As shown in the findings, 60.1% of the total variation in students' emotional wellbeing during ODL is explained by the Individual Related Challenges. There is only one significant predictor of the student's emotional wellbeing during ODL. However, the two insignificant predictors will become significant if the Individual Related Challenges is removed from the regression equation.

Thirdly, correlation between students' emotional wellbeing during ODL and each challenge shows that the Technical Challenges and Learning Experience Related Challenges, on their own, are a significant predictor of students' emotional wellbeing.

9. Conclusion

Despite the multitude of learning challenges during ODL, students have no choice but to learn and adapt to this new way of learning. Some students may favour hybrid and remote learning. Nevertheless, less-fortunate students who are vulnerable and struggle with financial difficulties, internet connectivity and family breakdown may not feel the same way. Therefore, supporting students with social-emotional skills is vital in order to ensure the fair and smooth access to education without any student being left out unnecessarily. Findings from the study also suggest that out of the three ODL challenges, Individual Related challenges had the highest impact on students' emotional wellbeing during ODL. In order to overcome this quandary, Students should learn how to manage their time, improve their communication skills and personal difficulties during ODL to improve their emotional wellness. Students should keep track of their spending, attend more online motivational presentations, and understand how to commit to their families and studies. Aside from that, they must enhance their communication skills during ODL in order to effectively communicate with their classmates and instructors. Attempting to find classmates with similar employment requirements may assist them in better managing their time so that they can learn together via online platforms. They must also attempt to explore the online platform regularly to become more familiar with all of the platform's functions.

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