



Open and Distance Learning during Malaysian Movement Control Order 2020: Reflections from University Students

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak has prompted universities in Malaysia to take a step to implement online teaching and learning in line with the instruction of the Ministry of Higher Education not to conduct face-to-face lectures but to take advantage of Online and Distance Learning (ODL) method starting from April 2020. Since this instruction needs to be implemented immediately, the question arises as to whether students are ready to pursue their studies remotely. Hence, the purpose of this study is to determine the readiness of university students to continue their studies using the ODL method. The study also aims to investigate students' reflection after completing the ODL process and to list the factors that contribute to the student's survival in the ODL courses. This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the data obtained. Key findings revealed that reflection of students towards the implementation of ODL can be categorized into three main categories which are positive, negative and neutral reflections. Overall, negative reflections given by the students can be categorized into four main issues which are adaptability struggle, unconducive learning environment, lack of readiness for self-directed learning and technical issues. Among the four issues, adaptability struggle is the major concern for students as 55.2% of students remarked the ODL as difficult, hard, tough and stressful especially for a course that involved calculation. The outcomes from the study suggest that many students are still in the process of adapting to the implementation of ODL. Even after experiencing the ODL, 30.3% of the students still prefer the traditional face-to-face learning compared to the ODL method. The lecturers and university administration should motivate students on the implementation of ODL and work to solve the four main issues raised by students if they want this method to be implemented successfully in the future.

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1. Introduction

Year 2020 started with the great outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic which hit almost all over the world, including Malaysia. By means of controlling the spread of the virus, the Government of Malaysia had announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) which commenced on 18th March 2020. This restriction of movement had caused great impact to many sectors, including changing the landscape of teaching and learning in all levels of education. Aligned with the new norms and the MCO rules, numbers of Institutes of Higher Education in Malaysia immediately swapped their mode of teaching and learning from the traditional face-to-face method to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) technique, as done by many other universities in other countries such as Australia, China, Egypt and Italy [1]. In Malaysia, most of the universities were in their first month of the new semester of year 2020 when the MCO was begun, and the instruction to carry on the semester session using the ODL technique was rather surprising and created varieties of perceptions at the beginning. Students foreseen the difficulties and challenges of ODL due to their stigma and negative attitudes towards the new approach as opposed to the traditional technique [2], and limited resources [3] accessible.

According to [4], the conventional program delivery method in Malaysia should contain elements of blended learning between 30% to 60% of the total program credit. The implementation of this blended learning, as practiced by the Open University Malaysia (OUM) combines several different delivery methods such as self-paced, individual learning, face-to-face interactions and online interactions [5]. This blended learning technique, even though is still supported by face-to-face interactions, have many challenges. Study by [6] categorized the issues and challenges of implementing blended learning in four classes that are institutions, instructors, students and technological aspects. The bandwidth issue and connectivity which goes under technological aspects by [6] was highlighted as one of the greatest challenges faced by students in [7] and [5], together with the difficulty in engaging learners online in the e-learning program.

Later findings by [8] labeled the challenges of ODL using three themes: Personal circumstances, teachers related issues and assessment and evaluation issues. This classification was almost the same as proposed by [9] who identified the challenges as internal, external and program-related challenges. Internal challenges were related to the characteristics of the learners such as self-management, learning process and technical issues, while external challenges were related to other factors such as the environment and family support. Issues related with the tutor and institutional were classified as program-related challenges.

The implementation of ODL in most of the courses in Malaysia during COVID-19 outbreak was categorized as totally "open" and "long distance" without any face-to-face communication between the students and their lecturers. Since students and lecturers can only interact virtually, ODL students faced greater problems and harder time than students using a blended learning approach. Even though they are full time students, they faced challenges like part time students as they stayed with their family, isolated from their peers and lecturers. Daily home routine environment distracted the ODL students, leading to procrastination. Most of the students have no one to monitor the learning process, hard time in being independent and absences of motivational factors due to less competition and interaction with lecturers and peers [10]. This was also agreed by [11] who found that ODL students have weak aptitude, lack of motivation and do not have enough time to study. Apart from that, [12] also reported on the conflicts and lack of support from family, besides an unfavorable home learning environment.

Due to the stigma and some negative attitudes towards ODL, a study was done to determine the readiness of students to continue their study using the ODL method. The study also aims to investigate students' reflection after completing the ODL process. It will also list the factors that contribute to the student's survival in the ODL courses. From the findings, it is hoped that lecturers could have some ideas on planning for a better approach to disseminate knowledge to the students so that the teaching and learning process via ODL is still as good as the traditional face-to-face method. The findings are also important to students to learn to be more independent and well-disciplined in managing their time wisely.

2. Methodology

There were 99 university students who were studying at diploma level in Perak have participated in this study, and they were selected non-randomly using convenience sampling techniques. The selected samples were students who enrolled in the course that mostly involved calculations, and they needed to come out with a group project report at the end of the semester.

The first phase of the data collection for this study was done before the ODL was fully implemented in mid of April 2020, while the second phase was done at the end of June 2020 after they have completed the lecture week for that current semester. The responses in both phases were collected via a Google Form.

In the first phase, the authors focused on the background of the students and access on students' readiness to start with the ODL courses. The questions on students' readiness were constructed using Likert scale. Basically, the authors wanted to have a summary on how far the students were physically and mentally prepared for the ODL so that preparation on a suitable platform can be planned. Data on readiness of students was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

In the second phase, the same students have to answer another survey to see their reflections towards the ODL courses after completing the 10-week period of ODL. Questions on reflections were given in the form of open ended and students were freely to share their experiences in ODL regarding any issues such as internet connection, material provided by lecturer, platform used by lecturer and motivation level. Responses of students' reflection on how they got through the ODL was examined and interpreted using qualitative content analysis.

[13] defined qualitative content analysis as a technique that seeks to classify written or oral materials into an effective number of categories that represent similar meanings. There are two ways to conduct the content analysis which is using inductive or deductive analysis. According to [14], an inductive approach is characterized by a search for patterns where the authors transferred the raw qualitative data to a more general theory or explanation. In this study, text from open ended questions were divided into meaning units that were shortened and coded. The codes were interpreted and compared for differences and similarities and sorted into three categories which were positive reflections, negative reflections and neutral. Through a process of discussion, the authors agreed to rename the negative reflections to the challenges and difficulties faced by students during the ODL implementation. The challenges and difficulties were then divided into four main issues: adaptability struggle, uncondusive learning environment, lack of readiness for self-directed learning and technical issues.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Demographic

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographical Information, n = 99

Characteristics	n (%)
Gender	
Male	23 (23.23)
Female	76 (76.77)
Location	
Urban	53 (53.54)
Rural	46 (46.46)
Internet access	
Yes	85 (85.86)
No	14 (14.14)
Types of internet connections	
Mobile Internet Plan	54 (54.55)
Home WiFi	41 (41.41)
Public WiFi	4 (4.04)
Devices	
Desktop	4 (4.04)
Laptop	88 (88.89)

Smartphone	7 (7.07)
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Most of the respondents were female (76.77%) and slightly more than half (53.54%) placed in urban areas during the ODL. Majority of the students (85.86%) have access to the internet connection. A total of 54 respondents (54.55%) accessed the internet using mobile internet plan while 45 students (45.45%) used either home WiFi or public WiFi to access the internet. The largest number of respondents (88.89%) indicated that they used a laptop as a device to access their online courses while there was 7.07% who only have their smartphones to do the same thing.

3.2 Readiness of Students

Two main questions were asked a few weeks before the ODL started to look at the readiness of the students to start their ODL courses. The first question (Q1) was "How do you estimate your mental level of readiness to learn the course by ODL?" and the second question (Q2) was "How do you see your level of readiness to work on your group project paper via ODL during MCO?" These two questions became concerned to the authors because of two main reasons. First, the students were having sudden changed from the traditional face-to-face method to totally ODL approach while facing uncertainty on what would've happened during the ODL session, how to adapt with the new approach and the stressed caused by the effect of the pandemic to their life, which may result on high level of anxiety to experience the new approach. Second, in most of the courses enrolled, the students need to work on a group project which needs them to have many discussions among them. Students' feedback on these two questions would help the lecturer to always motivate the students from time to time. Both of the questions were asked using Likert scale: Very unprepared, Unprepared, Ready and Very willing. The findings were summarized as in Table 2.

Table 2. Level of Readiness

Question	n (%)
Q1	
Very unprepared	1 (1.01)
Unprepared	26 (26.26)
Ready	66 (66.67)
Very willing	6 (6.06)
Q2	
Very unprepared	5 (5.05)
Unprepared	41 (41.41)
Ready	49 (49.49)
Very willing	4 (4.04)

As depicted in Table 2, most of the students (72.73%) were ready to start their ODL courses at the beginning. However, when they were asked about their readiness to work on the group project during the MCO, the percentage of readiness dropped to 53.53%. The students seemed doubtful to discuss the group project with their peers during the distance restriction.

Table 3. Level of Readiness by Location and Availability of Internet Access

		Urban		Rural		Total n (%)
		Internet access	No internet access	Internet access	No internet access	
Readiness	Ready	34	2	31	5	72 (72.73)
	Not ready	16	2	4	5	27 (27.27)
Total		50 (50.51)	4 (4.04)	35 (35.35)	10 (10.10)	99

From those who said that they were mentally ready to start their ODL session, 65 students have access to the internet with 34 of them staying in urban areas and the other 31 students staying

in rural areas (see Table 3). 16 students from those who were not ready for the ODL were staying in urban areas with internet access. Interestingly, seven out of 14 students said that they were mentally ready for their ODL despite having no internet access in their area.

3.3 Reflections

The reflections of students towards the ODL courses were collected after they have finished their 10-week classes. At that time, students were waiting for their final assessment in order to measure the overall achievement in the courses taken. The students were asked to list out anything regarding their experiences in the ODL process.

Table 4. Overall Reflections

Reflections	n (%)
Positive	44 (44.44)
Negative	45 (45.45)
Neutral	10 (10.10)
Total	99 (100.00)

Using content analysis, overall reflections of the students towards ODL were classified into three categories: positive, negative and neutral reflections, as summarized in Table 4. Any comments that showed happiness or appreciation along the process were considered as “positive” reflections such as “ODL offers lots of incentives for both lecturers and students”, “The learning process went smooth” and “There were two-way interactions and discussions which helped the students a lot”. Comments that showed the dislikeness or struggle were considered as “negative” reflections. Some of the comments were “ODL is hard for me to stay focused in my learning because I am the type of person who needs face-to-face learning” and “ODL caused me emotionally drained”. Responses that did not reflect on the ODL were categorized under “neutral”. From Table 4, almost half of the students (45.45%) generally have negative perception towards this process, while another 44.44% have positive reflections and the rest of students did not comment accordingly.

3.3.1 Positive Reflections

After 10-weeks of the ODL process, about 44.44% of the students were satisfied with the ODL process and felt that the process had gone well and the experiences were great, nice and good. They were happy as they have more and flexible time to study and catch up with the syllabus, therefore it was not tiring. The ODL process also has made the students become more independent, patient and focus. This can be seen from the comment such as “I think all the lecturers did a great job in order to teach us through an online platform. I became more independent than ever because of ODL”. There were also comments as “I would reflect that it is easy for me to cope and understand about this course as the method of learning this course suits me.” and “I think that the lecturer did very well in teaching this course even though it is online. There were two-way interactions and discussions which helped the students a lot.”

Among the students who have reflected positively, about 18.18% students assessed their ODL process as something new and inspired motivation. Some of those comments were “ODL has taught me to be more independent”, “Doing ODL taught me to be self-disciplined” and “I think ODL for this course is endurable”.

Some of the students were also moved by this sudden change. They assessed ODL as offering incentives to both lecturers and students, hence proposed different challenges and new experiences. They learned that in order to cope with the new style, they need to improve their time management. As they felt more struggle to earn knowledge, they were then realized on the importance of self-direction and self-discipline. Among the comments were “Doing ODL taught me to put much more effort in my studies. It is really tiring but satisfying when we finally get to understand the concept.” and “Doing ODL also taught me to be self-disciplined which was quite tough for me to adapt at first”. These comments showed students understanding that as they were learned independently, they needed to be more attentive, put more effort and searched for other sources rather than depending on their lecturers. With these positive attitudes, they believed that they could survive.

3.3.2 Negative Reflections

The negative reflections in Table 4 are related to the challenges and difficulties faced by students during the ODL implementation. In the negative reflections, students remarked the ODL process as “hard”, “tough”, “tiring”, “difficult” and “stressful”, and they needed to struggle along the way, which reflected their adaptability. Through a process of discussion, the authors agreed to rename the negative reflections to the challenges and difficulties faced by students during the ODL implementation. Those who gave positive feedback, however, also listed the difficulties they faced, which made the list of challenges and difficulties become longer. The authors therefore combined all the negative reflections and difficulties given by students and categorized them into four main challenges as listed in Table 5. It is to be noted that some students have listed more than one challenge, and there were students who did not list any challenges, therefore the total of 91 refers to the total responses of challenges and difficulties obtained.

Table 5. Challenges and Difficulties of ODL

Challenges	Number of responses (%)
Adaptability struggle	45 (45.45)
Technical issues	16 (16.16)
Unconducive learning environment	10 (10.10)
Lack of readiness for self-directed learning	20 (20.20)

*Total respondents are 99.

Table 5 shows that the most challenges faced by the students was the adaptability struggle in following the ODL courses (45.45%). These students have a hard time focusing on their learning activities and need to work extra hard compared to the usual face-to-face method. This was pictured out from the responses such as “ODL is hard and challenging for me”, “During my study, I had a hard time understanding it because of the ODL. I prefer to study face-to-face.” and “It’s really more complicated than studying face-to-face. It’s very hard to focus.” The ODL process was also evaluated as hard for a course which involves calculation, as shown by this comment: “It’s very tough honestly to learn calculation-related subjects online”.

Out of 99 respondents, 20.20% of the students gave comments that can be categorized as they were having a lack of readiness for self-directed learning. Some of them need longer time to adapt with this new routine of learning. The changes from the usual norms made their understanding and concentration became slower. The routines to work independently and alone made them become lazy, easily feeling tired and emotionally drained which led them to procrastinate their work and later having poor performance. Among the responses was “I think I’d rather go and study at class face to face rather than ODL because ODL makes me be lazy and like to postpone my work”. Another student said “I realized that I have a problem in time management when learning at home. I was doing great when I was on campus but at home, I got distracted by many factors”.

Another challenge that the students faced was technical issues (16.16%). There were two main problems raised by the students, first is the internet connectivity, whether the signal is too poor or the speed is too slow. The second problem is the device used during the ODL. Some students have inconvenience tools to be used during the ODL, for example a notebook that was not good enough to install the software needed for their teaching and learning. Other than that, period limitations given by the service provider to freely access their software during the MCO have somehow affected students in completing their project report, especially for those who worked on their project at the very last minute.

Unconducive learning environment is another challenge faced by the students (10.10%). Some of the students do not have a comfortable and conducive place to study as during the MCO, all other siblings were staying at home which created much noise and distractions hence provided no privacy for the students. They were also expected to give commitment to the house chores and other family members as well, which sometimes the help was needed during their class session. The students interpreted these as having no support and understanding from their family members. One student said “The surroundings to study at home are different like in school/college, thus it is difficult to concentrate and focus while the lecturer is lecturing”. The other student said “Sometimes families really need our help at the time when we have classes or tests. So, our focus slightly was disturbed”. There was also a comment of “It is difficult for me to do classwork around family. I get distracted easily and I don’t have privacy to study”. All these kinds of comments described the unconducive learning environment faced by students.

3.4 Factors Contribute to Students Survival in the ODL Courses

Even though the 10-week ODL process has created so much stress, most of the students acknowledged the availability of aids that helped them going through the course. Table 6 portrays the supporting learning medium listed by the students. About 26.26% of them were grateful for the lecture videos prepared by their lecturers for each subtopic. Even though there were students who felt that they desired for further explanation, most of them were satisfied with the videos as there were verbal explanations, varieties of examples and tips to answer the questions. The videos were also preferred as compared to live conferences as they can be watched at any time and repeatedly, and do not require too much data usage. This can be seen from one of the comments: "Although I very much prefer face-to-face learning, however learning through videos for ODL also helped me a lot to understand the knowledge within this course. I also refer to videos most of the time compared to the manual, as the verbal explanation in the videos made me understand better and easily." Another comment was "The video that the lecturer posted for every chapter was the most helpful for students to understand the chapter and it can be replayed as much as students want until they understand the chapter." This supported the findings from [15] who found that the usage of video lectures has significantly added value in the ODL courses, compared to only text.

Table 6. Supporting Learning Medium

Supporting Learning Medium	Number of responses (%)
Lecture Videos	26 (26.26)
Motivation	31 (31.31)
Discussion	16 (16.16)
Others	10 (10.10)

*Total respondents are 99.

Almost 31% of the students appreciated the dedication of the lecturers who continuously motivated and guided the students. The effort and commitment by the lecturers inspired the students to continue fighting despite all the challenges that they faced. The fast response given by the lecturers also helped the students to understand the content better. They commented as "I am very thankful to my lecturer for her determination to give knowledge is something that I admire the most", "Thanks to all lecturers because I barely manage to survive because all the lecturers are understanding and full of dedication" and "The lecturers were doing their job very well by inspiring and motivating me to stay positive and keep doing my best to follow the lectures and classes."

As physical classes were not available during the MCO, the weekly discussions through the WhatsApp group were thankful by 16.16% of the students. During the discussions, further explanations were given and misunderstandings were clarified. They also appreciated the help from their friends, who also gave input throughout the discussions, and the sample answers shared by them. One of the students said, "For this course, chapter 4 and 5 is a bit difficult than other chapters but with online discussion during class and with friends, it makes my understanding better."

Despite appreciating the efforts and supporting learning medium provided by the lecturers, 30.3% of the students mentioned in their comments that they still preferred conventional face-to-face learning compared to the ODL method. Some of the comments were "I prefer physical class than this ODL because it is so hard to stay focused at home.", "I prefer face-to-face learning than ODL." and "Overall, I think I can cope with ODL, but I still prefer face-to-face class in university and not from home." Most of the students realized that the physical classes have helped them a lot, not only because of the direct communication with the lecturer that ease all the process, but also the presence of their friends who actually motivate them indirectly

4. Conclusion

From the findings, it can be concluded that many students are still in the process of adapting with the implementation of ODL. Most of the students have positive perceptions towards ODL at the beginning, even though almost half of them were uneasy to prepare the assessment in the form of a group project. After experiencing the ODL for the first time, the majority felt that ODL was a tough journey, especially when they could not manage their time wisely and struggled in real time to follow

the ODL. They faced many challenges that arise either because of their self-weakness or surroundings. The main challenge that was identified was the adaptability struggle, followed by lack of readiness for self-directed learning, technical issues and uncondusive learning environment.

The adoption of ODL is believed to continue to rise rapidly and change the landscape of teaching and learning especially in undergraduate levels. ODL basically is not only about having a good internet connection but most importantly it involves good self-directed learning practicing among students. In order to succeed in ODL, students have to practice good self-disciplined and time-management strategies, reduce procrastination, always being organized and stay connected with their lecturers and peers.

Meantime, by understanding students' challenges, lecturers should also try their best to find the best combination of teaching and learning methods to balance the preference, needs and limitations among students. With combinations of the best effort from both lecturers and students, it is hoped that the implementation of ODL would be less burden and the journey is more enjoyable and well appreciated by both parties.

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