Navigating Higher Education in Malaysia: Lessons From Pandemic Challenges in Online Learning

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Abstract
On June 4th, 2023, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) Malaysia revealed its intention to implement a hybrid and flexible learning framework in Malaysian public universities, scheduled to commence during the 2023/2024 academic session. This announcement follows the prior utilization of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift from traditional teaching methods to the ODL model sparked significant reactions, underscoring the need to factor in these responses when formulating strategies for the forthcoming hybrid and flexible learning system in Malaysian HEIs. To address this, the present study employs a qualitative approach through the content analysis method to examine the challenges associated with ODL in the context of Malaysian HEIs during the COVID-19 crisis. The results of our investigation revealed three (3) primary challenges associated with ODL, encompassing 1) technological and technical aspects, 2) unconducive environments, and 3) emotional stress. Additionally, the researchers provide recommendations for stakeholders and policymakers within Malaysian HEIs, equipping them with insights into these challenges and opportunities as they gear up for the imminent integration of a hybrid and flexible learning system.
Keywords: hybrid and flexible learning, Open and Distance Learning, Malaysian Higher Education Institutions, COVID-19

Introduction
The landscape of higher education in Malaysia has undergone a transformative journey, progressing from traditional face-to-face instruction to more adaptive learning models. Historically, Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs) excelled in delivering education despite various challenges especially in grappling with accommodating the diverse needs of its stakeholders, especially students. The late 20th century witnessed the rise of distance learning methods, signifying a shift towards adaptable learning. As the internet gained prominence, Malaysian HEIs embraced digital platforms, granting students the flexibility to access resources at their convenience. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020

triggered a significant transformation in Malaysian HEIs. In response to the crisis and in alignment with the World Health Organization's recommendations, the Malaysian government imposed a Movement Control Order (MCO). This compelled HEIs to fully adopt Open and Distance Learning (ODL) methods until the MCO was lifted at the end of 2021. Subsequently, Malaysian HEIs began a gradual transition back to face-to-face operations starting the 2021/2022 semester.

Meanwhile, in June 2023, the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (henceforth, MOHE) introduced an ambitious blueprint for a structured hybrid and flexible learning system within Malaysian HEIs (Mohamed Radhi, June 4, 2023). The plan envisions students attending on-campus lectures during their first and final years, while offering the freedom to participate in ODL from home during the intervening years. This innovative paradigm not only enhances scheduling flexibility but also introduces cost efficiencies in tertiary education and opportunities for earlier workforce integration. In light of this significant plan, it is imperative to closely examine the challenges and opportunities encountered by stakeholders in Malaysian HEIs during the recent pandemic-driven adoption of ODL. Therefore, the present study aims to extract insights from relevant research, shedding light on the issues faced by stakeholders in Malaysian HEIs during the implementation of ODL in the COVID-19 era. This research is aligned with MOHE's forward-looking vision and aspires to provide invaluable guidance to policymakers and stakeholders, especially university management, educators, and students, for the successful implementation of the hybrid and flexible learning system in Malaysian HEIs.

Discussion
The abrupt transition to ODL amid the COVID-19 pandemic undeniably brought forth challenges and obstacles for both educators and learners within Malaysian HEIs, as the entirety of the teaching and learning process needed to be conducted in a virtual environment. In this context, the researchers have discerned three (3) primary categories of challenges encountered by students in Malaysian HEIs during the execution of ODL amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These categories encompass: 1) technological and technical challenges, 2) environmental and situational challenges, and 3) emotional challenges.

Challenges with Technological and Technical Issues
A common theme in the literature is the prevalence of challenges related to technology adoption during the pandemic-driven shift to ODL in Malaysian HEIs. The challenges are multifaceted and encompass issues faced by both educators and students. These challenges are particularly pronounced due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic, which expedited the need for online learning and exposed pre-existing gaps in technological readiness.

One significant challenge identified in the literature is the limited or poor access to the internet. This challenge is highlighted by studies conducted by Daud et al. (2022) and Ag-Ahmad (2020). Daud et al.'s (2022) study provides a concrete example of the technological challenges faced. By engaging with 38 Malaysian undergraduates, the study offers valuable insights into the specific issues that impeded effective remote learning, including restricted internet connectivity and inadequate access to technological tools. Meanwhile, Ag-Ahmad's (2020) research, involving 68 undergraduates, further supports the issue of limited internet access. The reliance on mobile data by a significant percentage of respondents underscores the need for improved internet infrastructure to ensure equitable access to online education.

In her study, it was unveiled that 73.5% of the respondents relied on mobile data, whereas merely 23.5% had access to home-based internet or Wi-Fi connections. These studies point out that a considerable number of students and educators struggled with inadequate internet connectivity, which hindered their ability to participate effectively in online learning activities. In many cases, this was exacerbated by limitations on mobile internet data, preventing seamless engagement with virtual classes and resources.

Additionally, the literature also underscores the limitation in terms of technological tools which subsequently contributed to the challenges. In a study by Nikman et al. (2022), it was discovered that the lack of necessary technological tools, such as laptops, computers, or other essential equipment, further hindered the transition to ODL. In a similar vein, this challenge was particularly pronounced in remote areas where access to these resources was limited. According to Nikman et al. (2022), although the broadband subscriptions and the internet penetration rate in Malaysia is steadily prospering from 2013 to 2014 with 67.3%, the gap between its household internet use by the urban and the rural area is still clearly visible. This has eventually contributed to a significant lack of internet access, particularly for students living in remote areas where the internet connection is poor and that reaching the students by phone is also challenging and troublesome (Nikman et al., 2022).

In addition, apart from the lack of technological support, insufficient knowledge and experience in distance education (Joshi et al., 2020), and the need for additional familiarity with technological tools and specialized technological pedagogical content knowledge in specific subject areas (Rap et al., 2020) seem to be the predominant factors contributing to the challenges faced, particularly by educators during ODL. For instance, a study conducted by Joshi et al. (2020) revealed that some educators lacked confidence in utilizing online teaching platforms, as these tools were unfamiliar to them prior to the pandemic. Notably, the adoption of Learning Management Systems (LMSs) and various video conferencing platforms like Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Cisco Collaboration Solutions introduced a new approach to teaching and learning that had limited prior exposure among both students and educators. Consequently, students encountered difficulties in grasping lessons delivered through ODL due to educators' limited digital literacy, further complicating the adaptation to these platforms during ODL initiatives.

Challenges with Unconducive Surroundings
As part of the measures implemented by the Malaysian government to curb the spread of COVID-19, students across all Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were required to vacate their campuses. However, the concept of "home" does not uniformly translate for all students. While certain individuals might view Open ODL as a means to attend classes wherever they find convenient, unfortunately, those hailing from B40 households are particularly disadvantaged in this scenario (Nassr et al., 2020). Ismail et al. (2020) shed light on the non-conducive learning environments that pose challenges for students originating from B40 families. The difficulties were particularly pronounced for students who returned to their homes during the initial lockdown without essential learning tools such as laptops, books, and study materials. These crucial resources were left behind, impacting their ability to effectively engage in academic pursuits. Moreover, the effectiveness of ODL was hindered by various external distractions. Joshi et al. (2020) noted that both educators and students grappled with interruptions stemming from external sources, including noise from neighbors, pets, vehicles, visitors, and family members within their households. Consequently, both

educators and students encountered impediments in maintaining a seamless teaching and learning process, often struggling to proceed without unwanted disruptions.

Moreover, the insights gleaned from a comprehensive study undertaken by Allam and Hassan (2020) provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by undergraduate students in a Malaysian HEI, involving a cohort of 631 participants. This study uncovers a crucial issue that greatly influenced students' participation in ODL during the pandemic: the inadequacy of their home learning environment. The study also reported that the pandemic forced family members to stay at home, the learning environment became unconducive due to the heightened activities and interactions within the household. This phenomenon was particularly pronounced as family members also adapted to remote work and online activities. Consequently, the confined and shared space at home posed a considerable obstacle to students' engagement in productive learning, revision, and completing course assessment tasks. The scarcity of designated study areas and the challenges of finding a quiet, focused space likely disrupted the students' ability to concentrate and effectively participate in their ODL endeavors.

Meanwhile, a study by Salleh et al (2021) encompassing 100 undergraduates at a Malaysian HEI revealed that 56% of the respondents grappled with an unsuitable learning environment amid the ODL implementation during the pandemic. The study further illuminated that undergraduates hailing from economically disadvantaged families endured the challenges of residing in cramped households, often sharing rooms with siblings throughout the lockdown periods. Moreover, a notable portion of these undergraduates lacked a designated study space, compelling them to utilize any available nooks at home, which inevitably led to discomfort. Furthermore, the study pointed out that a significant concern emerged surrounding the understanding and support of parents. It was observed that certain parents seemed oblivious to the unique challenges their children faced during ODL and, in some instances, assigned household chores to them during scheduled class times. This lack of comprehension and empathy added an additional layer of complexity to the students' attempts to engage in remote learning effectively. In essence, the literature on unconducive environments and surroundings during the implementation of ODL in Malaysian HEIs underscore the substantial impact of the home environment on students' ODL experiences during the pandemic. The findings emphasize the need for institutions and educational stakeholders to consider the diverse and often less-discussed challenges that students face in their daily lives, which can profoundly influence their ability to adapt and succeed in unconventional learning circumstances during ODL. Hence, recognizing and addressing such challenges is integral to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment, even in the midst of unprecedented disruptions like the global pandemic.

Challenges with Emotional Distress
As per Azlan et al (2021), in response to nationwide lockdowns, students from less privileged backgrounds expressed concerns over the closure of HEIs (Yee & Ean, 2020). The abrupt transition in learning practices within Malaysian HEIs placed a significant emotional strain on most full-time students, primarily stemming from factors like the unfamiliarity of a global pandemic, financial constraints, and challenges encountered during the implementation of ODL. Concerning the economic dimension, Malaysian students hail from diverse financial backgrounds encompassing the Bottom 40% (B40), Middle 40% (M40), and Top 20% (T20) categories. During the pandemic, these students not only had to navigate an unfamiliar educational landscape but also grappled with the numerous difficulties associated with

acquiring internet access and necessary technological equipment (Kamarul Azlan et al., 2021). With a considerable number of B40 students facing obstacles in procuring internet data for ODL classes, they opted for ODL platforms that consumed minimal data to circumvent interruptions during learning sessions and course assessments. Consequently, this situation adversely impacted their overall comprehension of the instructional content due to limitations, leading to a sense of falling behind and subsequent emotional distress.

Furthermore, the absence of a proper understanding of students' characteristics and attitudes has been linked to low engagement and a diminished likelihood of achieving desired learner outcomes among educators (Allam and Hassan, 2020). Consequently, it becomes imperative for educators to delve into the intricacies of students' traits and perspectives. This understanding serves as a foundation for tailoring and delivering learning experiences that align effectively with the unique needs of the students. Furthermore, Huang et al (2020) highlights an inherent challenge stemming from the remote nature of ODL: the inability of instructors to gauge feedback from their students. Unlike traditional face-to-face classes, where instructors can gauge reactions from students such as nodding, perplexed expressions, or raised hands, the remote setup makes such feedback less evident. Joshi et al (2020) add to the discourse by asserting that certain educators perceive online teaching as less effective when compared to conventional methods. Given that online teaching predominantly unfolds within the confines of a home environment, instructors often grapple with issues ranging from inadequate facilities to a lack of a traditional classroom comfort zone. This, coupled with resistance to change, ultimately results in suboptimal teaching experiences. Hence, the literature underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by both educators and students in the realm of ODL in Malaysian HEIs during the pandemic. This underlines the need for targeted emotional support as well as adaptability in ensuring the effectiveness of ODL in Malaysian HEIs.

Recommendations

The literature underscores the need for comprehensive support mechanisms, equitable access to resources, and targeted interventions to alleviate the technological, environmental, and emotional hurdles faced by students and educators in Malaysian HEIs during the pandemic-driven ODL implementation. In relation to the Ministry of Higher Education's (MOHE) recent strategy to introduce a hybrid and flexible learning system within Malaysian HEIs, the researchers offer several suggestions aimed at guaranteeing its efficacy for all pertinent stakeholders.

First is to prioritize the establishment of a robust and equitable technological infrastructure. Given the challenges with limited internet access and technological tools, HEIs should collaborate with relevant government agencies (for instance, Telekom Malaysia Berhad) and private sector partners (such as Telco providers; e.g. Celcom, Digi, Maxis, UMobile, etc.) to ensure widespread access to high-speed internet and necessary devices for students and educators. Initiatives such as subsidized data packages for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the provision of essential technological tools could help bridge the digital divide and create a more inclusive learning environment for all students. In addition, a comprehensive assessment of students' technological needs and regular updates on digital literacy training for both students and educators are vital to ensuring seamless participation in the hybrid and flexible learning system.

Next, it is also suggested to recognize and address the diverse learning environments that students come from. In developing the hybrid and flexible learning system, HEIs should

provide guidelines and resources for creating conducive home learning spaces. Moreover, offering alternatives for students who face distractions or lack a suitable study environment, such as access to campus facilities or local study centers, can enhance their engagement. Additionally, engaging parents and families in understanding the challenges of ODL learning and fostering a supportive atmosphere at home can positively impact students' learning experiences. HEIs could establish a communication channel to provide ongoing guidance and support for both students and families.

Finally, a comprehensive emotional support can be implemented by offering robust emotional support mechanisms for both students and educators. In doing so, HEIs should invest in counseling services and mental health resources that are readily accessible to students, addressing their emotional well-being. Similarly, educators should be provided with training and resources to effectively manage the emotional challenges faced by students and themselves. Promoting regular communication channels and virtual office hours can facilitate open discussions and alleviate feelings of isolation. Moreover, designing assessment methods and teaching pedagogy that consider the emotional challenges and potential inequalities can promote a more empathetic and understanding learning environment for the hybrid and flexible learning system.

Conclusion

Amidst the crucible of the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) swiftly pivoted towards Open and Distance Learning (ODL), a transition that brought forth a multitude of challenges. These challenges, categorized into three main domains, encapsulate a trove of knowledge that can be pivotal in shaping the forthcoming hybrid and flexible learning system envisioned by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MOHE).

The first category of challenges primarily stems from the digital divide, revealing glaring disparities in internet access. Studies have uncovered a significant proportion of students and educators grappling with limited connectivity, which in turn hindered their active participation in online learning activities. Furthermore, the scarcity of essential technological tools and educators' varying degrees of digital literacy compounded these difficulties, affecting their ability to engage effectively with ODL platforms. These technological and technical challenges underline the urgent need to ensure equitable access to technology for all, a vital lesson to heed as we progress towards the hybrid and flexible learning system envisaged by MOHE.

The second category encompasses environmental and situational challenges, underscoring the unequal impact of ODL on students. Students from B40 households found themselves in non-conducive home learning environments due to resource limitations and increased disturbances. Constrained living spaces and shared activities further disrupted effective learning, while limited parental understanding of the challenges added an additional layer of complexity. These challenges emphasize the imperative of creating suitable home learning environments and supporting students in diverse learning contexts, essential principles as we move towards MOHE's vision of a more adaptable learning system.

The third category revolves around emotional challenges, with students experiencing heightened emotional strain due to the unfamiliarity of the pandemic, financial constraints, and the challenges posed by ODL implementation. Emotional well-being emerged as a crucial factor influencing students' ability to engage effectively with learning. Recognizing and addressing these emotional challenges is integral to the success of the envisioned hybrid and

flexible learning system, requiring a proactive approach to supporting students' mental health and resilience.

In conclusion, the challenges faced during the execution of ODL in Malaysian HEIs amidst the pandemic serve as a reservoir of insights and knowledge. These challenges underscore the significance of prioritizing fair access to technology, establishing suitable home learning environments, and offering extensive emotional support. These lessons, learned through adversity, are invaluable as we prepare for the ambitious journey towards a more inclusive, efficient, and adaptable hybrid and flexible learning environment in Malaysian HEIs. They provide a roadmap for stakeholders and policymakers, guiding the development of strategies that effectively address the diverse requirements of both students and educators in this new era of higher education.

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