Challenges in Implementing Distance Learning and Assessment During Crisis in Malaysia Private Universities

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Abstract
This study is aimed to figure out the challenges that academic administrator at higher learning institution in Malaysia face when implementing distance learning and assessment. The Covid-19 pandemic has hugely affected the education system around the world. In Malaysia, Covid-19 caused educational institution at all levels to adapt to the changes brought upon by the pandemic. The implementation of distance learning and assessment via online learning was widely applied during that period. However, over the past 10 years, the occurrence of natural disaster has increased and has affected education. This crisis has resulted in changes on how we conduct classes and assessment. Utilizing a qualitative design that targeted academic administrator from TARUMT who implemented distance learning and assessment during crisis. The informant consists of Dean, Deputy Dean, Course Leader, and Course Coordinator from TARUMT who were affected by crisis before. The data was collected by using in-depth interview. The data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis. The finding showed that there are four challenges that the academic administrator from TARUMT faced when implementing distance learning and assessment during crisis. The data showed innovation is key in managing teaching and learning during crisis. It is highlighted in the finding that academic administrator in this study has to innovate and try new method to implement distance learning and assessment. The data also showed that other parties such as the management also need to play a part in order to improve the implementation of distance learning and assessment in the future.
Keywords: Distance Learning, Academic Administrator, Assessment

Introduction
The global COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted educational systems worldwide, compelling institutions to rapidly transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning and assessment. Over the past years, Malaysia has experienced a rise in occurrence of natural disaster such as flood. The frequent occurrences of flood have disrupted education in Malaysia by causing school and universities to be closed. To overcome this, educational institution in Malaysia has utilized distance learning to conduct classes and assessment. In Malaysia, private universities faced unprecedented challenges in adapting to

this new paradigm, as the crisis exposed gaps in infrastructure, pedagogical readiness, and institutional preparedness. While distance learning offered a viable solution to ensure continuity in education, its implementation was fraught with complexities, particularly in maintaining academic rigor, ensuring equitable access, and addressing the diverse needs of students and faculty. This paper explores the multifaceted challenges encountered by Malaysian private universities in implementing distance learning and assessment during the crisis. By examining issues such as technological limitations, faculty adaptability, student engagement, and the integrity of online assessments, this study aims to provide insights into the barriers faced and propose strategies to enhance the resilience of higher education institutions in future crises. The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms and innovative approaches to ensure that quality education remains accessible and effective, even in the face of unforeseen disruptions. Other than that, the findings from this study will help improve future preparation and organization of the implementation of distance learning during crisis.

Problem Statement

The sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced Malaysian private universities to swiftly transition to distance learning and online assessment systems. While this shift was necessary to ensure the continuity of education, it revealed significant challenges that hindered effective implementation. Many institutions struggled with inadequate technological infrastructure, limited digital literacy among faculty and students, and disparities in access to reliable internet and devices. Additionally, the abrupt move to online learning raised concerns about the quality of education, student engagement, and the integrity of assessments. Faculty members faced difficulties in adapting teaching methods to virtual platforms, while students grappled with isolation, motivation, and unequal learning opportunities. These challenges not only compromised the academic experience but also highlighted systemic vulnerabilities in the preparedness of private universities to handle crises.

Beyond the pandemic, Malaysia is also prone to natural disasters such as floods, landslides, and haze, which further disrupt educational activities and exacerbate existing challenges. For instance, annual monsoon floods often force the closure of schools and universities, displacing students and staff and causing significant delays in academic schedules. Similarly, prolonged haze episodes due to forest fires in neighboring regions have led to health concerns and the suspension of physical classes. These recurring natural disasters underscore the need for robust crisis management strategies that can ensure educational continuity during both health-related and environmental emergencies.

This study seeks to identify and analyze the key obstacles faced by Malaysian private universities in implementing distance learning and assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also considering the broader context of natural disasters. By examining these dual challenges, the research aims to propose comprehensive strategies to build a more resilient, inclusive, and adaptable educational framework capable of withstanding future disruptions, whether they stem from health crises or environmental catastrophes.

Research Objective
1. To identify and analyze the challenges faced by Malaysian private universities in implementing distance learning and assessment systems during the crisis.

Research Question
1. What are the issues faced by Malaysian private universities in implementing distance learning and assessment during crisis?

Literature Review

The implementation of distance learning and online assessment systems has become a critical area of study, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced educational institutions worldwide to rapidly adapt to remote teaching and learning. In Malaysia, private universities faced unique challenges in this transition, as highlighted by several studies. For instance, research by Azizan et al. (2020) emphasized the disparities in access to technology and reliable internet connectivity among students, which hindered equitable participation in online learning. Similarly, studies by Hashim et al. (2021) revealed that faculty members often lacked the necessary digital skills and pedagogical training to effectively deliver courses in a virtual environment, leading to concerns about the quality of education.

The shift to online assessments also raised significant issues related to academic integrity and fairness. According to Yunus and Said (2020), the absence of proctored examination environments increased the risk of cheating and plagiarism, prompting universities to explore alternative assessment methods such as project-based evaluations and open-book exams. However, these approaches were not without their challenges, as they required careful design to ensure they accurately measured student learning outcomes.

Beyond the pandemic, the impact of natural disasters on education in Malaysia has also been a subject of research. Annual monsoon floods, for example, have been shown to disrupt academic calendars and displace both students and staff, as noted by Ismail et al. (2019). These disruptions often result in prolonged school closures and learning losses, particularly for students in affected regions. Additionally, the recurring haze crisis, caused by forest fires in neighboring countries, has led to health-related school closures and further exacerbated educational inequalities (Sulaiman et al., 2020). These studies highlight the need for robust disaster preparedness plans that can ensure educational continuity during environmental crises.

Despite the growing body of literature on distance learning and disaster management in education, there remains a gap in understanding how Malaysian private universities can effectively integrate these two areas to build a resilient educational framework. While some studies have explored the challenges of online learning during the pandemic, few have considered the compounded effects of natural disasters on educational systems. This literature review underscores the importance of addressing both health-related and environmental crises in developing comprehensive strategies for educational continuity. By synthesizing existing research, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dual challenges faced by Malaysian private universities and to propose actionable solutions for enhancing their resilience in the face of future disruptions.

Distance learning and online learning have become integral components of modern education, particularly in the context of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These modes of learning, while not new, have gained unprecedented attention due to their ability to provide educational continuity in times of crisis. However, their implementation has revealed both opportunities and challenges, as explored in various studies.

Distance learning refers to a mode of education where students and instructors are physically separated, relying on technology to facilitate communication and content delivery (Moore et al., 2011). Online learning, a subset of distance learning, specifically utilizes internet-based platforms and tools to deliver instruction and engage learners (Allen & Seaman, 2017). The evolution of these approaches has been driven by advancements in technology, increasing internet accessibility, and the need for flexible learning options to cater to diverse student populations.

Research has highlighted several advantages of distance and online learning. These include flexibility in terms of time and location, which allows learners to balance education with other commitments (Means et al., 2014). Additionally, online learning platforms often provide access to a wide range of resources, such as recorded lectures, interactive modules, and digital libraries, which can enhance the learning experience (Dhawan, 2020). For institutions, online learning offers scalability and the potential to reach a global audience, thereby expanding their educational impact.

Despite its benefits, the implementation of distance and online learning is not without challenges. One of the most significant barriers is the digital divide, which refers to disparities in access to technology and reliable internet connectivity (Bakia et al., 2012). This issue is particularly pronounced in developing countries, where students from low-income households or rural areas may lack the necessary devices or infrastructure to participate effectively in online learning (Azizan et al., 2020).

Another challenge is the lack of digital literacy among both students and educators. Many faculty members struggle to adapt traditional teaching methods to online platforms, leading to concerns about the quality of instruction (Hashim et al., 2021). Similarly, students may face difficulties navigating online learning systems, which can hinder their engagement and academic performance (Rapanta et al., 2020).

Maintaining student engagement in online learning environments is a persistent challenge. Unlike face-to-face interactions, online learning often lacks the immediacy and personal connection that can motivate students (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Studies have shown that students in online courses are more likely to experience feelings of isolation and disengagement, which can lead to higher dropout rates (Kauffman, 2015). To address this, educators have explored various strategies, such as incorporating interactive elements like discussion forums, virtual group work, and gamification (Bond et al., 2020).

The shift to online learning has also raised concerns about assessment practices and academic integrity. Traditional examination methods are difficult to replicate in virtual environments, leading to increased risks of cheating and plagiarism (Yunus & Said, 2020). In response, institutions have adopted alternative assessment methods, such as project-based

evaluations, open-book exams, and peer assessments. However, these approaches require careful design to ensure they accurately measure learning outcomes and maintain academic standards (Rasheed et al., 2020).

Effective implementation of distance and online learning requires robust institutional support. This includes providing training for faculty to enhance their digital skills, investing in reliable technology infrastructure, and offering technical support to students (Dhawan, 2020). Additionally, institutions must develop clear policies and guidelines to address issues such as data privacy, cybersecurity, and equitable access to resources (Bates, 2019).

The literature on distance learning and online learning underscores its potential to transform education, particularly in times of crisis. However, the challenges associated with its implementation—ranging from technological barriers to issues of engagement and assessment—highlight the need for comprehensive strategies to ensure its effectiveness. By addressing these challenges, educational institutions can harness the benefits of online learning to provide accessible, flexible, and high-quality education to diverse learner populations.

Methodology

The qualitative approach was used in this study to gather data. Qualitative researchers are interested in the "why" and "how" of describing and interpreting a phenomenon. It uses a systematic approach that guides the investigation of a subject through organic and direct interaction with the informants in order to clarify the phenomenon. Using interpretive and practical interviews, qualitative research can explore a variety of human interests or viewpoints. Qualitative research aims to understand respondents' experiences by investigating their subjective perspectives. Respondents' opinions are prioritized over the researcher's in this naturalistic approach to empirical research (Boswell & Babchuk, 2022).

A program, event, activity, process, or one or more people are all thoroughly examined in case studies, a qualitative research method. For the case or cases that are limited by time and activity, researchers use a range of data collecting approaches to collect detailed information over a long period of time (Priya, 2020). An empirical research that examines a phenomenon in its natural environment is called a case study. A variety of data collection methods are employed in case study research since it involves a thorough analysis of a phenomenon. It is important to emphasize that, as Yin (2009) noted, a case study is a plan or strategy for examining a social unit rather than a method for collecting data.

Sample Selection

The samples of this study were selected among academic administrator in Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TARUMT). The samples that were selected were course coordinator, course/program leader and dean. These individuals are responsible in managing the teaching and learning of the subject. Their duty includes, creating the syllabus and assessment, managing the teaching personal and coming up with the guidelines on how to conduct the lesson and assessment. The selected samples also must has at least 5 years of experience in managing teaching and learning.

The Interview Procedure

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews. In this study, ten individuals were interviewed. They are all academic administrator from various subject from the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities. In order to address the research questions, the interviewer presents two main questions. An expert reviewed the interview question to make sure it was legitimate. The interview was place in Malaysian Bahasa. This was primarily done to ensure that the subject would comprehend the question more fully and to prevent any misunderstandings about the topic of the inquiry. The data gathered from the interview will be translated into English, and the researcher explained everything in Bahasa Malaysia. An English language lecturer reviewed the data to prevent it from being misunderstood. A second education management specialist then verifies the information. This is to guarantee the data's veracity.
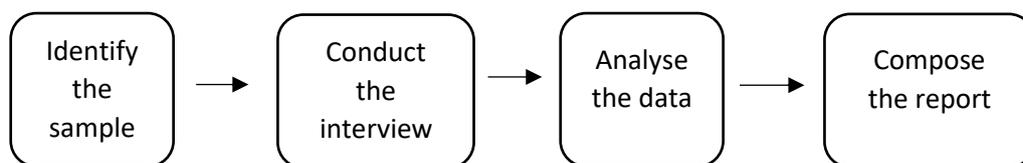
Identify the sample → Conduct the interview → Analyse the data → Compose the report

Figure 1: Data collection procedure

Data Analysis
Thematic analysis was utilized in this study to analyze the data. Nvivo was used to analyze the data. The finding of the research discovers. 5 themes were discovered from the research based on the data obtained.
Theme 1: Technical issue.
Sub-theme 1: Equipment issue
Sub-theme 2: Internet issues
Theme 2: Lack of preparation to conduct the alternative lesson method.
Sub-theme 1: Lecturers were not trained to conduct the lesson using alternative method.
Theme 3: Changing the teaching and assessment method.
Sub-theme 1: Adapting the lesson material and approach.
Sub-Theme 2: Changing the assessment method.
Theme 4: The validity of the assessment
Sub-theme 1: Increased in cheating.

Theme 1: Technical Issue

Theme 1 discuss on the main challenges that academic administrator faced when implementing distance learning and assessment during crisis. All subject stated during their interview that technical issues were the biggest challenge that they need to address when managing teaching and learning during crisis. Informant 01 stated:

"I have received a lot of complaints from my lecturers regarding issue with the equipment, the internet and so on. It was among the first thing I need to address. Some lecturers stated that either their lecturers do not have proper equipment or it's the students. It was quite challenging to address this issue."

Sub-theme 1: Equipment Issue

All informant stated in their interview that the biggest challenges that they face when trying to implement distance learning and assessment during crisis is the lack of proper equipment. Informant 07 stated:

"My lecturers complaint that their pc and laptop are outdated and cannot comply with the demand of online class. They also stated that their PC cannot perform the task properly and would crash and hang all the time during class and lesson…. One of my lecturers stated that his laptop completely froze during a practical presentation of a cooking assessment."

Sub-theme 2: Internet Issues

7 informants stated in their interview that they were facing problem with the weak and poor internet connection. Informant 05 stated:

"One of my lecturer once told me that she ran out of data while conducting class and has to scramble to buy data because her house do not have house internet." Some lecturers also stated that their student also tell them that they do not have strong internet connection to do some assessment such as live streaming of their work and upload a large file."

Theme 2: Lack of Preparation to Conduct the Alternative Lesson Method

Theme 2 discuss on how the lack of preparation to conduct the alternative lesson method were one of the challenges that academic administrator face when implementing distance learning and assessment during crisis. 7 informants stated this in their interview. Informant 02 stated:

"My lecturers were very unprepared to implement the alternative lesson method.. for example in 2024.. several of our students who are supposed to complete their final practical assessment were trapped in their home due to flood.. we have to ask them to complete the assessment via live stream… unfortunately, the lecturers who was in charge was not prepared for it and it didn't go so well and we have to postpone the assessment… this severely affected the students because they were in their final year."

Sub-theme 1: Lecturers Were Not Trained to Conduct the Lesson Using Alternative Method

4 informants stated that the challenges that they faced were that their lecturers were not properly trained to conduct the alternative method. Informant 04 stated:

"Some of my subject require students to do practical assessment in front of the lecturer. When some of my student were stuck during flood in 2024 we decided to use live streaming for them to do the assessment….. However, some of my lecturers were incapable of handling the process that so many problems arise during the assessment…. Issue such as camera not functioning, no sound were the most common… I have to ask the IT department to help our lecturers…"

Theme 3: Changing the Teaching and Assessment Method

6 informants stated that changing the teaching and assessment method was one of the challenges that they have to overcome when implementing distance learning and assessment during crisis. Informant 03 stated:

" I have to change and adapt the lesson so that it can be continued… when Covid-19 happens we have to change the lesson for everyone… but last year was different when the major flood hit east coast stated and cost several of our students to be stranded and couldn't come back to campus… I have to change the assessment method so that the affected student will not fall behind… to change the assessment method was very challenging because it different than before…"

Sub-theme 1: Adapting the Lesson Material and Approach
4 informants stated in their interview that they have to adapt the lesson material and change the teaching approach. Informant 08 stated:

"When the flood happen last year we have to change the lesson material to adapt to the situation. We resorted to doing live streaming and making the classes more interactive."

Sub-Theme 2: Changing the Assessment Method
5 informants stated in their interview that they have to change the assessment method. Informant 09 stated:

" My subject require student to show their work in front of me so that I can assess their skills… when flood happen last year… I have to ask them to create a video of themselves doing the assessment and sending it to me… This was quite challenging because I have to make sure that their assessment was not delayed because the semester was ending."

Theme 4: The Validity of the Assessment
Issue with the validity of the assessment was stated by 5 of the informants in their interview. Informant 10 stated:

"There was complaint from some of my lecturers that their students didn't do the required work properly and some were even caught cheating… For example… one of my lecturers caught a student using video from other people as their assignment video…"

Sub-theme 1: Increased in Cheating
4 informants stated in their interview that cheating was one of the issues that they have to face when implementing distance learning and assessment during crisis. Informant 06 stated:

"One of the issues that I have to address was the cheating that occurred during the assessment… one of the subject that I handle were change to online test because of what happen last year… however we found that the students who take the online test were cheating by using AI and internet to answer the question."

Discussion
The finding of this study indicates that there are a lot of issue that need to be addressed when implementing distance learning and assessment during crisis. There is a need to revise what can be consider as a crisis. This is because natural disaster has also become quite frequent over the past 10 years in Malaysia.

The first thing that need to note from the finding of the study is the need to better prepare higher learning institutions. The study find that higher learning institutes need to prepare better equipment and provide training to the lecturers. This is highlighted in the finding. Higher learning institution must invest on proper equipment for their lecturers and update their systems and internet access. They also must provide the proper training to help their lecturers.

This study also highlighted how the academic administrator has to innovate and find solution to overcome the issue that arise. Distance learning is a very broad concept that requires innovation and utilization of different tools. The samples from TARUMT utilizes different method to conduct lesson and assessment. The need for innovation and trying new ideas is essential for the continuation of the learning process.

The issue with the integrity of the education process itself was also found form this study. The study found that the integrity of the course and program were compromised by the act of cheating during the assessment. These issues need to be addressed by the academic administrator to ensure that their institution integrity is not affected.

Conclusion

This study highlighted that the implementation of distance learning and assessment during crisis in Malaysia has a lot of challenges that need to be addressed. There is a need to improve on the existing policy that arise because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Several parties such as the management must play their part in order to better prepare their lecturers and institution for future crisis.

The study also highlighted the need for academic administrator to innovate and implement new way of conducting lesson and assessment. Academic administrator must also come up with contingency plan for crisis management in the future. Lecturers also need to be more prepared in the future to ensure a smoother transition to the alternative method of teaching and assessment.

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