University Students' Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Implementation Amidst COVID-19

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Abstract: Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been implemented in universities around the world since decades ago. With COVID-19 pandemic, its implementation has been accelerated globally at an unprecedented speed and haste. Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate the university students' perspectives on ODL amidst COVID-19. By using the convenient sampling method, a total of 608 diploma and degree students throughout Malaysia have participated and shared their feedback on ODL implementation. The collected data covered their general feedback and what they enjoyed the most about ODL. Moreover, their recommendations on ODL implementation were analyzed by categorising the responses into different themes. The demographic data was summarized using descriptive analysis. A comparison between the diploma and the degree students' perspectives is also discussed in the paper. The findings show that most students have positive perceptions on ODL implementation, where positive feedback and fun factors are highlighted by the respondents. Some students indicated that ODL should not be continued in the future semester, due to problems such as poor internet connection, budget constraints and time management issues. Recommendations on improvements for better ODL implementations in the near future are also provided. This study contributes to more effective ODL management by presenting the learners' perspectives

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Online Learning Platforms, Technology, Teaching and Learning, University Students

1.   Introduction

The year 2020 has been an extraordinary one. The deadly COVID-19 virus has come uninvited, shaken the world and forced instant changes to the way of life. Since the virus was discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, the number of infected cases has increased overnight and rapidly, it is spreading to other parts of the world, causing a lot of fatality to those infected. Due to the alarming situation, the World Health Organization (WHO) immediately declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on the 11th March 2020, warning the world of its danger. Precautionary actions are necessary to stop the further spread of the silent killer. The Malaysian government is also working hard in controlling the spread of the virus by enforcing Movement Control Order (MCO), other policies, guidelines, and restrictions to all sectors, as well as education (Chung, Noor & Mathew, 2020a). Universities were told to close during the first phase of MCO and they are still not opened for physical class implementation until today. In response to the government's actions and the self-initiatives of the universities' management in the country, the education sector could only agree that technology is the

only way forward. Despite the hardship caused by COVID-19, the learners' academic interests are not disregarded as most academicians strive hard to provide teaching and learning activities with any available methods, tools and means.

The development of technology has remarkably benefited many industries including the educational sector. The evolution of the internet technology has complemented the delivery of lessons, regardless of primary, secondary, or tertiary levels of education. Nowadays, the use of nonconventional methods of teaching is very relevant and of great demand as the group of learners in higher learning institutions are the technology natives (Chung et al, 2020a). Engaging students to do e-learning was a choice given, whether to implement that option in the learning environment or stick to being in the four walls method (Abdelmalak, 2015). Both instructors and learners are given no choice but to proceed with Online and Distance Learning as the replacement of the conventional face-to- face method. The issue now is whether ODL implementation has actually satisfied the learners in their academic achievement, as the students or learners are the important stakeholders during the whole teaching and learning process, in all educational institutions.

As a result, this paper aims to investigate the university students' perspectives on ODL implementation amidst COVID-19. For necessary improvements in the coming semester, exploring the students' perspectives is undoubtedly interesting but greater emphasis needs to be placed on how the implementation of ODL has impacted their learning in the past semester. Furthermore, understanding the students' perspectives will provide valuable insights on the improvements of ODL implementation, where these recommendations are necessary for a more effective lesson delivery. Hence, the paper has addressed these questions:

1. What are the general feedbacks on the ODL implementation?
2. What do the students enjoy most about ODL?
3. What are the areas of ODL implementation that require improvement?

Numerous studies have been conducted to discuss the impacts of the pandemic situation on the education sector. The restrictions to run the university normally has caused academic stress among university students and instructors, from having to change the ways things are run to having to acquire new technology skills within a short period of time. The pandemic has given a whole new experience to students in their learning environment (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). In the past, e-learning was discussed widely as the new way of delivering lessons. Today, ODL's popularity has skyrocketed as it offers the optimum solution to the academic stress during this current situation.

With the recent pandemic COVID-19outbreak, the need to use ODL in delivering the lessons has become more vital to ensure continuity of the teaching and learning process. Driven by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 4th Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that is to provide quality education for all, many universities are motivated to move towards that direction. The implementation of ODL in universities around the world has only increased further since COVID-19 pandemic early this year. Moreover, previous literatures have also noted the practicality of ODL implementations and the importance of students' feedback to enhance the learning outcomes. The findings vary from positive perceptions to drawbacks that might hinder the learners from making full use of ODL in their academic lessons (Ana,Purnawarman,Saripudin, Muktiarni, Dwiyanti, & Mustakim, 2020; Gosh, 2012; Shahzad, Hassan, Aremu, Hussain & Lodhi, 2020.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach where the data was collected using a survey form. As the Movement Control Order was still in enforcement during data collection, utilizing Google Form as the tool was deemed most suitable. It was convenient and easily accessible to achieve the promising response rate from the targeted respondents. The items were divided into two sections, namely the respondents' demographic and the open-ended questions to gauge the feedback on the ODL implementation. The demographic items include the respondent's gender, age, program level, semester, location of ODL engagement, the state location they are at, and internet connection quality. The open-ended questions are:

1) What are your feedbacks regarding ODL implementation of your university?
2) What are the things you enjoy most about ODL implementation?
3) What are your recommendations on ODL implementation in the future?

The responses in the demographic section were later analyzed using the descriptive tools of SPSS, the frequency, and the percentage. The open-ended responses were grouped and categorized into meaningful themes as the foundations of results and discussions of the study findings. The online survey used convenience sampling to draw samples from university students all around Malaysia. To reduce bias, Google Form is distributed through the instructors and colleagues, instead of distributing directly to the students. In this manner, the survey is directed to the right target group. The first half of the responses were checked before full analysis was performed.

3. Results and discussions

A total of 608 respondents from both diploma and degree throughout Malaysia have participated and shared their feedback on the ODL implementation in their respective universities. The response rate was satisfying, and this was contributed by the convenience offered by the tool used in the data collection process. The qualitative data on the students' perspectives have covered their general feedbacks, what they have enjoyed most about ODL and their recommendations on ODL implementation, in which were analyzed accordingly and reported in this section. The demographic background of the respondents is shown in the Table 1.

The respondents of the study consist of 35.5% males and 64.5% female respondents, with the age range between 18 to 25 years old, and the majority of the respondents are 20 years old with 38.5%, while the lowest number of respondents are from the 18 years old group with 0.8%. This is consistent with the next category of the demographic background, in which most of the respondents are diploma students with 387 respondents. In terms of semester, the highest percentages are the respondents who are currently in their second semester with 40% and the lowest with 2.1% from those who are currently in their 7th semester and above. The next item on the demographic profile is the location of the respondents during ODL engagement in the past semester. 63.7% of them were at home (city areas), followed by 30.8% who were also at home but in the rural areas, and lastly, 5.6% did their ODL at their university hostel. In terms of the state location they were at, the percentages between the states in West Malaysia and East Malaysia show 18.4% difference and most of the respondents were located in Sabah and Sarawak during the ODL implementation. Finally, the respondents were also asked to rate their internet connection quality during ODL. Majority had average quality of internet connection with the highest percentage of 46.9% and the least with poor internet connection quality, 6.3 %. The extreme end of very good internet connection quality and the poor internet connection quality does not show great difference.

The next section of this paper discusses the themes that emerged from the responses collected from the respondents. A total of 1,351 responses were generated, analyzed and categorized into a group of themes. The summary of 1,351 responses according to program level is shown in Figure 1. As depicted, majority of the responses came from the degree students, which is 59%, although the number of degree level respondents is less than diploma students. The possible reason could be that they are more matured, hence better at expressing their thoughts on ODL implementation. The summary of the total themes that emerged from the responses is available in Table 2.

Table 1. Demographic table of the respondents

Variables	*n*	%

|		
Gender		
Male	216	35.5
Female	392	64.5
Age		
18	5	0.8
19	105	17.3
20	234	38.5
21	135	22.2
22	79	13.0
23	26	4.3
24	18	3.0
25	6	1.0
Program Level		
Diploma	387	63.7
Degree	221	36.3
Semester		
1	26	4.3
2	243	40.0
3	94	15.5
4	153	25.2
5	50	8.2
6	29	4.8
7 and above	13	2.1
Location of ODL engagement		
Home/ City	387	63.7
Home/ Rural areas	187	30.8
University Hostel	34	5.6
State location you are in		
East Malaysia	360	59.2
West Malaysia	248	40.8
Internet Connection Quality		
Very Good	47	7.7
Good	238	39.1
Average	285	46.9
Poor	38	6.3
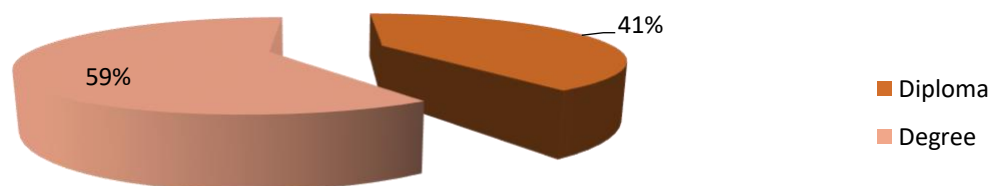
Figure. 1. The Responses Percentages between diploma and degree respondents

Table 2. Summary of themes based on items and program levels

Items	Themes Emerged	Total Themes	Program Level	
			Diploma	Degree
			n	*n*
The general feedbacks on ODL implementation	Lecturers' delivery style	9	102	39
	ODL Platforms		89	87
	ODL Flexibility		52	15
	Preference on physical class		10	6
	Internet connection		24	8
	Okay with ODL		17	38
	Not enjoying ODL		16	45
	Others		16	12
	No comment		20	32
	Total responses:		**346**	**382**
Factors enjoyed most about ODL implementation	Interactions	7	24	52
	Choice of ODL Platforms & methods		40	102
	Flexibility and convenience		30	83
	Learning from home		12	24
	Online Assessments		17	25
	Ability to meet dateline		9	13
	Everything about ODL		2	16
	Total responses:		**134**	**315**
The recommendations on ODL implementation	Internet connection aid	7	25	5
	Interesting ODL delivery		33	30
	Time management & Scheduling		10	17
	Reduction in assignments		18	2
	Use pre-recorded lesson more		32	44
	Others		12	16
	Total responses:		**130**	**144**
GRAND TOTAL		**22**	**1,351**	

Based on the table above, a total of 22 themes have emerged from the responses that are obtained from the three open-ended questions of the survey. The first item is on the general feedback on ODL implementation which recorded 346 responses from the diploma program and 382 responses from the degree program. Nine consistent themes come into sight for both program levels, namely Lecturers' delivery style, ODL Platforms, ODL Flexibility, Preference on physical class, Internet connection, Okay with ODL, Not enjoying ODL, Others and No comment. The validity of the themes is consistent with the past study by Cole, Shelly & Swartz (2017) and Swan (2001). The most frequent feedback given by the diploma students comes from the lecturers' delivery style theme where the respondents gave comments on their lecturers' delivery during ODL. For instance, they hoped their lecturers could check their understanding by asking questions every now and then, to provide more examples to the contents and to give out exercises, not quizzes. However, when combined, the majority of the repeated feedback show the choices of ODL platforms used by the lecturers, with 176 responses. Among the comments, they claimed to be happy with the choice of platforms used by their lecturers, such as YouTube, which is entertaining and convenient. The responses show positive reactions to the use of Google Classroom where the students could view the awarded marks immediately after the lecturers have completed their marking. Among these nine themes, only one theme falls under the negative reaction of ODL. The 'not enjoying ODL' theme has indicated 61 responses. Some clarified their reasons such as it was tough due to poor internet connection and the difficulty to cope with ODL. In the 'Others' category theme, the majority of the feedback complimented the lecturers' efforts in trying their best to deliver ODL during this difficult time and they believe everything will be better in the future. Table 3 shows some direct quotes on the general feedback responses.

Table 3. General Feedback Responses extracted from different themes

No.	Responses
1.	*Continue to use recorded videos because it consumes less internet quota than attending classes through Google Meet/ Facebook Live/ Zoom Meeting.*
2.	*Now, I am satisfied with pre -recorded videos so that I can replay when I do not understand the content*
3.	*I'm not expecting 100% online, might be good if 50-50 online and face to face but what can we do since this MCO, we cannot attend face to face class*
4.	*Everything is excellent, I like this way of teaching and learning method.*
5.	*So far okay, we will get used to it very soon*

When asked on what they have enjoyed the most about ODL implementation, both groups also have consistent themes on the factors (seven fun factors). For the first theme which is interaction, the degree students recorded higher responses with 52 responses compared to 25 responses from the diploma group. Though both groups enjoyed the interaction during ODL, degree students are found to enjoy it more. The next enjoyable theme is the choice of ODL platforms and methods used by the lecturer. This is proven by the highest frequency of this theme by both diploma and degree groups as compared to other themes. For instance, the positive comments mainly highlighted on how pleased they were when the lecturers chose to use the most convenient platforms to conduct the lessons, such as Google Classroom, YouTube videos, Zoom Meeting, Telegram and WhatsApp. Though some mentioned that they did not prefer the class to be done via messaging (WhatsApp & Telegram), they still appreciate the efforts made by the lecturers to reach them. Both groups are found to be happy with the choices made by lecturers who used asynchronous methods, in a form of video, voice note or audio recordings. They repeatedly claimed that this helped them to cope with the lesson better, besides the convenience factor. The method did not only allow them to feel as if they were in actual class, but this enabled them to repeat the lecture anytime when needed, mainly to enhance the understanding of the subject. Some of the responses are shown in Table 4**.**

Table 4. Responses on what the respondents enjoy most about ODL

No.	Responses
1.	*I enjoyed online class because I can access all the information of the courses anytime I want*
2.	*Being able to repeat the pre-recorded video to understand better*
3.	*I can watch the pre-recorded videos of the topic that I do not understand multiple times*
4.	*No face to face during morning class where I don't have to get up and get dressed up for class*
5.	*It is easy to submit our assessment*

Another interesting fun factor that emerged from the responses is learning from home. 36 responses from both diploma and degree students mentioned that they are happy to attend online classes from home as they do not have to get out of bed and avoid the morning rush to attend classes. Not only that, another two themes they enjoyed on ODL are the online assessments and the ability to meet deadlines. Clearly, the degree students enjoyed the online assessments slightly more than the diploma and they felt encouraged when they were given more assessments as exercises, especially for calculation subjects. On the ability to meet deadlines, ODL literally gives the students this advantage as they can easily submit their work on time, anywhere without having to go to the physical place or print out assignments. 18 responses have made up the final theme where they enjoyed everything about ODL in the past semester. However, the exact factor contributing to that was not mentioned.

Apart from the general comments and the fun factors that contributed to the enjoyment in ODL, the respondents also shared their areas of concern to help improve ODL implementation in the future. Out of the 274 responses received from diploma and degree students, seven themes were generated. They have recommended that they should be considered to get some aid for internet connection as ODL consumed a lot of their mobile data. Some hoped to get data support from the government to curb the internet connection problems in their areas, in order to ease their participation during ODL exercises.

However, the recommendation came from mostly the diploma students with 25 responses, and only five responses were derived from the degree students. This response is related to the platforms and methods used by the lecturers. For instance, some requested that lecturers should not use live applications such as Google Meet, Facebook Live and Zoom Meeting as these consumed a lot of mobile data. As the students had many classes to attend, one-hour session of each real time online meeting has exhausted their data allocation for the week. 76 respondents strongly recommend the theme of using more pre-recorded videos compared to other methods. Chung (2020) found that asynchronous learning using google classroom and YouTube videos was the most preferred online learning method during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other than that, quite a significant number of recommendations come from the next theme, which is the request for lecturers to make ODL lessons be more interesting. Both diploma and degree students think that lecturers should make ODL lessons more interesting with games, by including other videos besides the lecture videos and providing more online quizzes such as Kahoot! (Chung, Amir & Mathew, 2020). On top of that, the students also suggested that the lecturers who use ODL need to improve clarity of instructions, offer more exercises and examples, and prepare interesting lesson materials. These will not only make ODL more interesting, but it will also be enriching at the same time. The next concern has an interesting finding. Both groups suggested reducing the number of assignments, with 10 diploma students and only two responses from the degree group. The degree students seemed to accept the load better, where instead of reducing the total number of assignments, they requested for longer time to complete the assignments.

Moreover, the next emerging theme is time management and scheduling. The 27 responses raised their concerns on proper time management, not only for the lecturers but also themselves. Most suggested that the online classes should follow the official timetable to help the students to cope better, while others recommended to be given more time in the completion of tasks. The final theme is 'others' where the respondents mentioned that ODL will improve to be better in the coming semester. Some of the quotes are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Recommendation Responses extracted from different themes

No.	Responses
1.	*Due to internet connection matters, I hope that the time given to do / finish an online task especially during the test to be a little bit longer.*
2.	*There is nothing to improve, all the lecturers are doing their best*
3.	*Consider the students who have no stable internet connection.*
4.	*So far everything is fine now. It is just that for next semester or upcoming semester, I prefer to have face to face classes. Hopefully this COVID-19 will end soon and will have a class as usual. Everything is doing good now and I still can learn through online learning. But not for calculation parts.*
5.	*When uploading something to Google Classroom, please inform the students, because sometimes Google Classroom takes a bit slow/late to send the notification to me. For example, when having a quiz. It takes time to load.*

A comparison between the diploma and the degree students' perspectives draws some interesting and important findings. The findings show that many of the students have positive perceptions about ODL implementation in the past semester. This is supported by the positive feedback and the fun factors highlighted by the respondents. Some indicated that ODL should not be continued in the future semesters due to poor internet connection, budget constraints and time management issues. Poor internet connection is the major setback that plagued many students during this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Although many of them indicated satisfaction with online learning, poor internet connection was a major factor that contributed to their lack of intention to continue using it in the future. (Chung & Mathew, 2020). One of the findings indicates that the students enjoyed the interaction when using ODL as a learning method. This finding is consistent with the importance of having active interaction between the instructor and the students for a more effective learning (Maboe, 2017).

Overall, it can be concluded that in general, respondents in this study have accepted ODL implementation, although some issues remained to be solved. The negative points were related to

technical problems of ODL such as limited internet data and connection, and methods rather than the subject contents delivery. This is consistent with the past findings in past research on ODL and e-learning (Chung, Supramaniam & Dass, 2020; Çakýroglu, 2014; Cole, Shelly & Swartz, 2014). Being engaged in OLD as first timers for most users, ODL flexibility seems to be a hard rule to follow due to the old norm which has fixed time for formal lesson delivery. The needs to address issues raised by the students are critical as these affect the learners' emotions in class. Though the meet ups in ODL are not physical, the communication demands attention from both parties. Recognizing the emotions of learners has proven its benefits such as better students' engagement and high motivation, to strive for good scores for the subject (Bouhlal, Aarika, Abdelouahid, Elfilali, & Benlahmar, 2020). The finding also found that the students demand for a more interesting ODL lesson. One of the methods is by adapting the art of story re-telling; videotaping the story telling. Millennial generations today love videos and visuals to make sense of their learning (Chan, 2019).

4. Conclusions and Future Direction

In conclusion, university students have shown positive feelings about the overall implementation of ODL. The contributing factors to this are due to the encouraging initiatives by the lecturers in their lesson delivery and the ODL platforms used. The platforms that are very popular and most preferred are the asynchronous methods, where they can replay the lessons at any other time needed. Some indicated that ODL should not be continued in the future semester, due to poor internet connection, budget constraints and time management issues. Therefore, ODL in the previous semester has been successfully implemented with several improvement measures required. Despite the challenges faced in ODL implementation in the past, the opportunity to innovate teaching is available for the instructors to explore. On the positive note, ODL as the post COVID-19 new norm has proven that learning has no boundaries. Instead of conducting lessons within the four walls in the traditional norm, the implementation of ODL will take teaching and learning to a whole new level and unleash creativity for both learners and instructors. This can be done through the development of interactive teaching and learning materials, expanding the audience to reach through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and blend the traditional approach with ODL tools such as fun online games and quizzes (Ghazali, Nordin, Abdullah, & Ayub (2020). These ODL tools and methods allow both instructors and learners to enjoy the interaction, which is often perceived to be missing during ODL. Future research should consider getting insights from the instructors to match the expectation of both parties on ODL implementation.

5. Acknowledgements

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