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Challenges of Using Online Distance Learning Platforms in Higher Education: Perception of Business Students

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Abstract: The year 2020 has changed the world of education intensely with the distinctive rise of online distance learning (ODL), whereby teaching and learning are undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. Driven by both the pandemic and advancements in digital technologies, the new norm of online learning continues to persist post-pandemic. Therefore, this paper explored the extent of ODL challenges faced by semester 5 business students in one of the public universities in Malaysia. Their perception of internal and external challenges namely time management, attitude, self-esteem, internet connection, socioeconomic and non-conducive environment will be examined. By using non-probability sampling, data were gathered from a total of 110 semesters 5 business students from 9 courses in the Faculty of Business and Management. The findings of this study revealed that internal challenges domain (time management, attitude, self-esteem) affect students the most in ODL. Consequently, the result of this study is hoped to help the education community prepare for a hybrid and flexible learning system as recently announced by the Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE).

Keywords: *ODL challenges, time management, internet connection, self-esteem, socioeconomic, non-conducive environment.*

1. Introduction and Background

The realm of education has witnessed significant transformations in recent years. Propelled by the 2020 pandemic, with its unprecedented challenges, technological advancements and the changing demands of learners further accelerated the adoption of online learning platforms, showcasing their potential in overcoming geographical barriers and ensuring continuity in education. In response to the evolving educational landscape, Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) recently made a groundbreaking announcement to introduce a hybrid and flexible learning system in universities. Online learning within the context of hybrid learning is referred to as teaching and learning in an environment that uses the Internet and other technological devices and tools for synchronous and asynchronous instructional delivery and management of academic programs (Usher & Barak, 2020; Huang, 2019). The hybrid and flexible learning system acknowledges the importance of fostering an engaging and interactive learning environment. By incorporating face-to-face interactions and immersive experiences, it aims to enhance student engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking skills.

This approach recognizes the unique value of in-person interactions, allowing students to benefit from direct interactions with peers, instructors, and resources, while still capitalizing on the convenience and accessibility offered by online platforms. The adoption of online classroom games or gamification in the context of hybrid and flexible learning can enhance the quality of education and promote active student participation in a hybrid learning environment (Essa, 2023). This approach not only aligns with the changing expectations of students but also addresses the challenges associated with traditional online instruction, such as low student engagement and high attrition rates (Cheung & Ng, 2021). While the introduction of the hybrid and flexible learning system presents tremendous opportunities, it also brings forth a range of challenges that must be addressed. Because online learning challenges vary in terms of type and extent specifically in the context of Malaysian education, this has elevated a concern on ODL possible challenges and how students are adapting to this new mode of learning. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the perception of business students on internal ODL challenges namely time management, attitude, and self-esteem as well as external ODL challenges that include internet connection, socioeconomic and non-conducive environment.

2. Literature Review

Evidence from COVID-19 has uncovered numerous ODL challenges which highlighted insufficiencies and inequities in the education systems especially in higher learning institutions ranging from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs (Schleicher, 2020). Likewise, Karunadasa, Liyanahetti, and Fernando (2021) pointed out that some of the obstacles faced by undergraduates in using the e-learning platform during the pandemic include poor infrastructure, poor access to internet facilities and social and income gaps. Students also highlighted that response time, lack of practice and motivation towards the use of technology in education, lack of face-to-face interaction and absence of socialization were among the challenges of online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Alea, Fabrea, Roldan, & Farooqi, 2020). A study revealed that the high cost of the Internet was a major challenge and many of the learners found the affordability of the Internet as a major concern (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza & Zebron, 2015). Students with connectivity issues, such as having subscribed to lower speed and limited internet plans at home, or staying in locations that have a weaker internet connection, may be denied access and mainly left out of this digital transition (Yates, Starkey, Egerton, & Flueggen, 2021).

Similarly, Amorighoye (2020) notes that the inequalities in access to the internet and use of new media technologies differ along the lines of sociodemographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of students which are correlated with various indicators such as gender, age, level of education, geographic location and income level. In Nigeria, the majority of the population with internet access is from richer socioeconomic and urban households who can afford private school education, thereby giving their children a learning advantage over their public school counterparts (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020). Children coming from disadvantaged or poorer socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have limited access to internet connectivity, computers, mobile phones, functional ICT skills and active parental support due to monetary issues (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Henaku (2020) stated that the lack of physical space conducive to studying especially in a home-learning environment has also become another challenge along with internet and socioeconomic factors. He explained that the home was not conducive to online learning due to numerous forms of disruption for instance having to participate in household chores and taking care of younger siblings (Henaku, 2020). Moreover, Ismail, Bakar & Wafa (2020) also mentioned that some students who are living in flat housing areas found that their housing area can be a bit noisy and cause a disturbance in their concentration.

Apart from facing external challenges in ODL, students in higher learning institutions need to deal with challenges from within. According to Amida, Algarni and Stupnisky (2020), time management abilities are more crucial in ODL than in traditional formal structure which requires self-control to commit satisfactory time to course work Time management is the technique through which people manage and monitor their schedules and responsibilities. Effective time management techniques have been proven to help students cope with anxiety and stress (Akintayo, Adetunji, Ayantunji, & Olaniyan, 2020). Students who utilize time management techniques will have better control of their ODL (Khairuddin, Arif, & Khairuddin, 2020). Another important element in the internal factor domain is the attitude of the students. Zaidi, Osmanaj, Ali, & Zaidi (2021) demonstrate that the connection between self-efficacy, individual creativity, and attitudes toward have a major impact on ODL preparedness and adoption. On another note, Blanco, et al. (2020) cited that the role of self-esteem in learning online has a big impact on a student's academic performance. With the sudden changes in ways of learning from physical classes to online distance learning, multiple students are still at a loss (Blanco, et al., 2020). Ghani et al. (2020) as 70% of the students agree that having low self-esteem during online distance learning is one of the challenges. Thus, having low self-esteem hurts academic achievement (Reddy, 2020).

3. Research Methodology

This study investigated students' online learning experience in higher education within the context of the pandemic. Specifically, it explored the challenges of online distance learning among Malaysian Business Students using two independent variables domain: Internal Challenges; Time management, Attitude and Self Esteem and External Challenges; Socio-economic, Non-Conducive Environment and Internet Connection. The researcher administered an online survey with the use of Google Forms to distribute a total of 130

questionnaires. Through stratified sampling technique, the researcher has identified the target population of Business Students in semester 5 who have used at least one of the online learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, Google Meet, Webex, Telegram, WhatsApp and other applications proposed by the university. The respondents were drawn from a list given by the student's academic division. After removing the incomplete responses, 110 responses were judged valid for data analysis. The administered questionnaire consists of two main sections namely Section A which comprises questions focusing on the demographic profiles of participants and Section B which includes questions related to measuring the determinants of students' perception of online distance learning. To meet the study objective, measurement items were adapted from a variety of sources. The items for Internet cost, Socioeconomic and non-conducive environment were adapted from LIlonga, Ashipala, & Tomas (2020), Villanueva & Núñez (2020) and Sundarasen, et al., (2020), whereas the items for Time management, Low self-esteem and Attitude were adapted from (Rafique, Mahmood, Warraich, & Rehman, 2021; Baticulon, et al, 2021). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents sets of results relating to demographic profiles and the level of student perception of ODL challenges. They are discussed thoroughly to further comprehend the purpose of the study. Table 1 provides demographic information on the respondents involved. The demographic profiles of the respondents show that 75.50% of the respondents were females and 24.5% were males. The majority of them were between the ages of 23 and 24 (63.60%), followed by those below the age of 23 with 26.4 % and the remaining 2.7% of the respondents in the sample were between the ages of 18 and 20. The study involved respondents from 9 different programs in the Faculty of Business Management which include BBA Office Systems Management (15.5%), BBA Entrepreneurship (13.7%), BBA Customer Service Management (7.2%), BBA Health Administration (5.5%), BBA Event Management (6.4%), BBA Marketing (3.6%), BBA Insurance (8.1%), BBA Finance (7.3%), BBA Human Resource Management (32.7%).

Table 1: Demographic Profiles of Respondents

Profiles	Description	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	75.5
	Female	24.5
Age	18-20	10.0
	21-22	26.4
	23-24	63.6
Course	BBA Office Systems Management	15.5
	BBA Entrepreneurship	13.7
	BBA Customer Service Management	7.2
	BBA Health Administration	5.5
	BBA Event Management	6.4
	BBA Marketing	3.6
	BBA Insurance	8.1
	BBA Finance	7.3
	BBA Human Resource Management	32.7

Descriptive Statistics: Student's Perception on External and Internal ODL Challenges. Table 2 and Table 3 depict the mean scores and SD for the extent of challenges that students experienced during online learning. Under the category of external challenge, findings in Table 2 reveal that the highest mean score was linked to a non-conducive environment. 68.8% (μ = 3.93, SD = 1.029) of the students perceived that having to concentrate in a home-learning environment posed the greatest challenge in online learning as they were asked to help their parents with housework at the same time. This is particularly true as Suryaman (2020) pointed out that the home environment is not conducive due to limited learning space and having to perform responsibilities at home for instance taking care of younger siblings as well as helping out with household chores. Other factors deemed to be challenging are the cost of the internet and expensive digital devices with mean values of 3.82 and 3.75 respectively. This result is somehow the same as a study done by Villanueva and Núñez (2020) that students find it costly to access the devices and Internet connection needed for online

learning. Correspondingly, Barrot et al. (2021) stated that COVID-19 aggravated the financial difficulties experienced by some students as a result of their parents' unemployment. This financial impact consequently affects their online learning experience due to the lack of funding for their online classes and the high cost of Internet data as well as ICT devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones.

Table 2: Level of Perception on External Challenges

External challenges	Percentage of Agreement (%)	Mean (μ)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Internet			
I have a problem accessing the internet at home.	30.9	3.02	1.173
I live in poor internet connection areas.	29.1	2.83	1.233
The internet service is costly.	66.4	3.82	1.060
I have to buy extra data to complete my assignment	40.9	3.02	1.471
I have difficulty being involved in Online Distance Learning (ODL) classes due to poor internet connection	49.0	2.53	1.094
Socioeconomic			
I have limited gadgets or devices that can be used for Online Distance Learning (ODL)	25.5	2.43	1.310
Online learning materials such as devices (e.g., laptops and smartphones) are more expensive compared to books	62.7	3.75	1.272
I do not get enough support from my family to go through the Online Distance Learning (ODL)	24.6	2.35	1.310
The main source of our family income is affected by the pandemic therefore I need to work for extra income.	21.8	2.45	1.286
Despite my family being on a tight budget, we had no choice but to subscribe to an internet service provider	35.5	2.78	1.222
Non-Conducive Environment			
I found it hard to study or concentrate during Online Distance Learning (ODL) class because of the need to do house chores on time.	68.8	3.93	1.029
I think the Online Distance Learning (ODL) mode is quite difficult because most of my family members are not aware of the online lecture method.	51.9	3.42	1.316
I do not have a conducive home for studying because of limited space.	50.0	3.25	1.405
I do not have a conducive home for studying because of the noisy background.	56.4	3.45	1.192

Table 3 below illustrates that students were experiencing greater challenges in personal issues like feeling unmotivated, having trouble managing time and being unable to comprehend the lesson taught during ODL. This is based on the results displayed in Table 3 as the mean value for most of the items from internal challenges are high. The current study reveals that students perceived the need to cope with ODL as demotivating and a tough experience. With the highest mean of 4.06**,** 71.7 % of the students agreed that they "feel demotivated in adapting to ODL mode". Consistent with the findings of Ismail et al. (2020), it is found that difficulty adjusting learning styles was among the barriers to online learning. Similarly, Henaku (2020) findings have complemented current results that motivation is a key factor in determining a student's attitude and behavior toward adapting to any learning environment. Furthermore, students who are motivated to study do better academically than those who lack the motivation to learn.

The findings also illustrate that the next highest mean with the value of 3.85 is one of the items in the time management variable in which 67% of the respondents agreed on the statement "I am poor at managing time between ODL class and doing leisure activities at home." This is consistent with Amida, Algarni, and Stupnisky (2020) that students who utilized time management techniques will have better control of their ODL). Similarly, Mila Sari and Megayanti (2021) agreed that one of the challenges students face during the ODL process is centering on inefficiencies in their time management resulting in difficulties to catch up with ODL classes. In the self-esteem category, students' perception of their inability to comprehend lessons taught during ODL is considered high with a mean score of 3.85. When asked if the subject taught is hard to understand due to ODL mode, 63.6% of respondents agreed. Supported by Ghani et al. (2020) and Dhawan (2020), students were struggling to understand the learning content while trying to survive the conditions at home due to being inadequately prepared to balance their work, family, and social lives with their study life in online learning.

Table 3: Level of Perception on Internal Challenges

Internal challenges	Percentage of Agreement (%)	Mean (μ)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Time management			
I am poor at managing time between Online Distance Learning (ODL) classes and doing leisure activities at home.	67.0	3.85	1.077
I do not carry out my study plan during Online Distance Learning (ODL) mode.	56.6	3.59	1.069
I did not read the learning materials in advance before the Online Distance Learning (ODL) class.	50.9	3.53	1.115
I do not set aside time to study the Online Distance Learning (ODL) courses that I have taken this semester.	51.8	3.55	1.055
I do not prioritize my work first before doing other things that are not related to my Online Distance Learning (ODL) class.	48.1	3.31	1.147
Attitude			
I am easily distracted by other online activities such as surfing social media, online texting, and video gaming when Online Distance Learning (ODL) classes occur.	70.9	3.98	1.023
I tend to procrastinate on tasks given during Online Distance Learning (ODL) classes.	63.6	3.81	1.054
I feel demotivated in adapting to Online Distance Learning (ODL) mode.	71.7	4.06	0.998
I tend to have less interest and less effectiveness towards my Online Distance Learning (ODL) study due to being at home	68.2	3.95	1.070
I am getting better at adapting to the Online Distance Learning (ODL) process.	14.5	2.47	1.047
Low Self-Esteem			
It is hard to understand the subjects that have been taught due to Online Distance Learning (ODL) mode.	63.6	3.85	1.094
Online Distance Learning (ODL) class is not helping me with my academics.	42.7	3.44	1.138
Due to low self-esteem, it is harder for me to discuss and ask questions during Online Distance Learning (ODL) sessions.	54.5	3.65	1.169
Online Distance Learning (ODL) mode developed anxiety in me due to low self-esteem	53.6	3.61	1.235
The given materials are harder to comprehend during Online Distance Learning (ODL) class	60.0	3.72	1.110

Findings in Table 4 indicate that the level of ODL challenges experienced among Business students is high for all internal factors (time management, attitude and self-esteem) with the highest mean value of 3.65 for both attitude and self-esteem. As for external factors, the non-conducive environment and the internet posed a moderate challenge with a mean score of 3.25 while the least challenging factor was the socioeconomic background of the student (μ = 2.75, SD = 1.276).

Table 4: Level of Perceived Challenges Toward ODL

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Internet	3.168	1.237
Socioeconomic	2.752	1.276
Non-conducive Environment	3.257	1.281
Time Management	3.566	1.093
Attitude	3.654	1.038
Low Self-esteem	3.654	1.149

As referred to in Table 5, the outcomes of the comparison between the overall average of challenges originating externally and those stemming internally indicate that students' predominant perception of challenges in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) leans towards internal factors. The variance in the mean values is evident, with internal challenges (mean difference of 3.625) surpassing the mean of external challenges (3.059). This highlights the prevalent agreement among students that internal challenges have a more substantial impact on them during ODL. This discrepancy underscores the prevailing belief that internal challenges, encompassing time management, attitude, and self-esteem, have a more pronounced effect on students during ODL, as opposed to the external challenges of internet accessibility, socioeconomic factors, and non-conducive environment. As the proportion of challenges increases, so does the perceived negative impact on students' experience with ODL**.**

Table 5: Overall Mean for External and Internal Challenges of ODL

Item	Mean
The overall mean of external challenges	3.059
The overall mean of internal challenges	3.625

5. Conclusion

In this context of an advanced communication and information technology environment, the pursuit of establishing massive open online courses (MOOCs) and e-learning platforms becomes a policy initiative. Similarly, by comprehending e-learning standards, challenges and the dynamics of digital education, universities and educational institutions can better prepare for the future of education in a digitalized world. In conclusion, the implementation of hybrid and flexible learning in Malaysian universities by the Ministry of Higher Education holds substantial implications for the country's education future. This forward-thinking approach recognizes the changing nature of learning and the necessity to adjust to diverse student needs and technological progress. The policy not only enhances education accessibility but also emphasizes personalized learning and the integration of technology into teaching methods. While these implications offer notable advantages, careful monitoring is essential to ensure the efficacy and quality of flexible learning. As Malaysia pioneers a more adaptable and comprehensive education system, collaboration among stakeholders, continuous educator development, and investment in digital infrastructure will play a pivotal role in maximizing the positive effects of this policy shift. Thus, learning from students' experiences during the period of COVID will help us shape future hybrid delivery so that improvements can be put forward to embrace the inevitable online tertiary education in the forthcoming.

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