

Supporting Early Childhood Education ODL Students During Learning Disruptions

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Abstract – The Covid-19 pandemic for the first time caused considerable upheavals in almost every aspect of life, including the shut-down of educational institutions. While there has been some research carried out on the effect of the pandemic on the education sector, hardly any studies have focused on the ways of supporting learners during such learning disruptions. This paper aims to provide student-centered solutions to support early childhood education ODL learners when there are unanticipated disruptions to their learning pathways. The rationale for choosing this batch of students is that most of them are early childhood education practitioners and they were, like the university, affected by shut-downs in their place of work. This research utilised a qualitative design comprising focussed group interviews, individual interviews and questionnaires. Relevant themes and content about the impact of the COVID-19 period on the progress of ODL Early Childhood Education (ECE) students in their academic studies were identified. Besides that, data about the coping strategies of ODL ECE students in managing the impact of the pandemic on their academic studies as well as possible ways the university could facilitate ODL ECE students' progress in their studies in response to the impact of the Covid-19 period that they faced were collected too. Individual interviews that enable in-depth information were collected. The participants of the study were the students enrolled in the Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE) programme in one private ODL university in Malaysia. The students involved were sampled purposively to include those who had either withdrew, deferred or continued with their studies so that the research sampled all categories of students. Three administrative staff were interviewed individually to collect data about the means university could facilitate ODL ECE students' progress during such learning disruptions. It was found that the students' studies were affected in both positive and negative ways. Through their responses in several focused groups and individual interviews, a number of solutions that are based on their perspectives can be generated. These solutions can be used to resolve future as well as current issues that affect their academic progress. Possible suggestions include tutors need to change their teaching strategies to be more effective towards ODL teaching, and to have more counsellors to advise and motivate the students.

Keywords – Supporting, Early Childhood Education, ODL, Learning Disruptions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia is part of the ongoing worldwide pandemic of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). In response to the surge of cases in March 2020, the Malaysian government led by the then Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin imposed a nationwide lockdown known as the Movement Control

Order (MCO), which came into effect on 18 March 2020 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020). In relation to this, many educational institutions had to cancel their physical classes and to switch to online modes. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way of learning in higher education. Teaching and learning activities that are usually carried out in face-to-face meetings have turned into virtual meetings on various online learning applications (Kusuma & Hamidah, 2020). The government progressively relaxed lockdown restrictions in staggered phases. Following high vaccination rates in the adult population against COVID-19 and a decrease in the number of severe cases of the disease since September 2021, Malaysia announced its intention to transition to treating COVID-19 as an endemic disease at the end of October 2021, with more generalised restrictions being eased.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research have been carried out to examine the attitudes of higher education students towards compulsory digital and distance learning university courses amid Coronavirus (2020) (Muhammad Adnan and Kainat Anwar, 2020). Undergraduates and postgraduates were surveyed to examine their perspectives about online learning and instruction. The lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor, response time and absence of traditional classroom socialization were among the issues highlighted by higher education students (Muhammad Adnan & Kainat Anwar, 2020). Despite the negative impact, there was positive impact too. More and more educational institutions are adopting online learning as a learning method for delivering learning material. Educational institutions are moving towards using the Internet for sending data, material or learning content for students (Simamora, 2020). Research on impact of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Education had been carried out (Timmons, K., Cooper, A., Bozek, E. et al, 2021). How about Impact of Covid-19 period on the progress of ODL Early Childhood Education students in their academic studies? What were and are the issues the ODLEarly Childhood students encountered? ECE students are a rather unique group of students as they are mainly already in the ECE industry and their work days and hours may stretch beyond that of other working adult students. Moreover, in Malaysia, the salary and disposable income of the majority of ECE personnel are at the lower end and quite close to the minimum wage stipulated by the government. ECE providers just like the other educational providers were forced to shut down during the pandemic. This would have certainly had ripple effects of the students as well. It would be useful and beneficial for both students and the university to know the issues they have faced so that sensible and appropriate measures could be suggested to facilitate the progress of students in their academic studies. Besides that,

this is a proactive measure too as we never know when will be the next wave of varian virus attacking us. By knowing the impact of Covid-19 period on the progress of ODL Early Childhood Education students in their academic studies, preventive measure can be taken. As such, this research seeks to investigate the impact of Covid-19 period on the progress of ODL ECE students in their academic studies and also the implications for the university in responding to the issues encountered.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since December 2019, the entire world witnessed the Corona virus 2019 (COVID – 19) pandemic which affected all aspects of life including education (Wendel et al., 2020; Daniel 2020; Breaux et al., 2021 in Salwa M.K., 2022). The government of Malaysia decided to close the educational institutions during the first Movement Control Order (MCO) for 110 days in 2020. During this time, the Education Ministry (MOE) implemented the Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran di Rumah PdPR (Home-based Learning) for all of its educational institutions including secondary schools (Jaspal Kaur, N. S. & Jagdave Singh, A. S., 2021). The closure of higher institutions and schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the structure of teaching and learning, that is from meeting physically in the institutions or schools to virtual classrooms (Chee S.L. & Yap T. T., 2020).

This physical closure of buildings did not impede the higher institution's ambitious goals and aspirations. Instead, it only increased them (Reem A. Al-Samiri, 2021). The administrators, lecturers and students rose to the occasion and gradually adjusted to the new normal in education.

However, the effectiveness of the education and the quality of student learning is also an important phenomenon in the teaching and learning process. The student voice is important in this issue (Mailizar et al., 2020). More research is needed so that educators, lecturers and students who conduct on line learning can solve the problems faced.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This paper aims to provide student-centred solutions to support early childhood education ODL learners when there are unanticipated disruptions to their learning pathways. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- What are the positive and negative impact of the COVID-19 period on the progress of ODL ECE students in their academic studies?
- To identify the coping strategies of ODL ECE students in managing the impact of the pandemic on their academic studies.?
- To identify the possible implications for the university in response to the impact of the pandemic on the progress of the ODL ECE students in their academic studies.?

V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the positive and negative impact of the COVID-19 period on the progress of ODL ECE students in their academic studies?
- How did the ODL ECE students manage the issues and challenges they faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are possible ways the university could facilitate ODL ECE students' progress in their studies in response to the impact of the Covid -19 period that they face.

VI. METHOD

This is case study research. A qualitative research design was used, comprising focussed group interviews, individual interviews and questionnaires administration. Qualitative research approach was applied so as to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D., 2018). Focussed group interviews were carried out to identify the relevant themes and content about the impact of the COVID-19 period on the progress of ODL ECE students in their academic studies. Besides that, data about the coping strategies of ODL ECE students in managing the impact of the pandemic on their academic studies as well as possible ways the university could facilitate ODL ECE students' progress in their studies in response to the impact of the Covid-19 period that they faced were collected through focussed group interviews, individual interviews, or questionnaires too. On top of that, FlexLearn student portal was accessed for selecting purposive participants. Three administrative staffs were interviewed individually to collect data about the ways university could facilitate ODL ECE students' progress in relation to the impact of the pandemic on the progress of the ODL ECE students in their academic studies. The method used depends on the availability of the participants for interviews.

Focus group interviews and individual interviews were conducted online. Participants were interviewed by the three researchers. Semi structured questions were asked, with the intention to elicit views and opinions from the participants. Three focus group interviews with two participants in each group had been carried out to stimulate the participants in making explicit views, perceptions and reasons (Punch, K. F., 2010). Two participants who were not able to join the focus group interviews were involved in individual interviews while a participant who could not join the interviews due to time factor, questionnaire was administered. The questions in the questionnaire were the same as the questions asked during interviews. Questionnaire was emailed to a participant who could not join in for the interviews.

Participants

12 participants were involved in this study. They were divided into group A and group B. For group A, nine of them were students enrolled in the Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE) programme in one private ODL university in Malaysia while for group B, the three participants were the administrative staff from the same

university. In group A, six participants were kindergarten teachers (A, E, F, L, Y and W), one participant was a kindergarten principal (P), one participant was a departmental store staff (M) and another one participant was a tuition teacher (T). They were sampled purposively. They belonged to the withdrawn, deferred and continued study group so that the research samples covered different categories of students. Besides this criterion, students were from different cohorts of study.

For group B, the three participants who were administrative staff, involved in managing student enrolment (CH), student portal (SY) and library management (B). They were interviewed individually.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the focussed group interviews, individual interviews and also the questionnaire was analysed thematically using NVivo. All the data was categorised and coded. Within case and cross-case analysis were carried out. Cross-case analysis was done to help us to know something about the relevance or applicability of our findings to other similar settings as well as to deepen understanding and explanation (Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A.M., 1994).

VII. FINDINGS

The findings were focused on three aspects: (i) the positive and negative impact of the COVID-19 period on the progress of ODL ECE students in their academic studies, (ii) the coping strategies of ODL ECE students in managing the impact of the pandemic on their academic studies and (iii) the possible ways the university could facilitate ODL ECE students' progress in their studies in response to the impact of the Covid -19 period that they face.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Period on the Progress of ODL ECE Students in Their Academic Studies Negative Impact

During the period between 18 March 2020 until September 2021, when Covid-19 hit Malaysia, the group A participants' life underwent significant changes. They encountered disruptions in their studies. Classes had been shifted from face to face to online learning. The transition to online learning was challenging, as it disrupted their routine and separated them from the social aspects of on-campus life. Not only that, balancing studies with the uncertainties of the pandemic was stressful. Their progress of study during the pandemic wasn't entirely as expected. They had difficulties in adapting to online learning. The sudden shift to remote learning required adjustments that they had not initially planned for. They needed some time to learn the technology and the application as it was new to them. On top of that, they found that sometimes it was inconvenient for them to have classes started punctually due to the internet connections. The Internet access is not stable, prone to breakdowns. This gave rise to the delaying of classes and time was consumed in waiting to logged in for classes.

All of the participants from group A found that interactions between tutor and students and also among students became less. They could not have face to face collaborative learning and discussion with their peer groups

which was more effective in studying, especially in completing the task of the assignment. Although they could contact each other through phone call or messages, it was less fun and less effective. As the lessons were recorded, they were shy to ask questions. The lecturers' movements were limited too as they could not demonstrate as freely as before the ways of interactions with the young children.

P, W and Y had the opinion that online learning was less interesting and less effective compare to the physical class. As the screen was limited for online classes, the students could not view fully the facial expression and the body language of the tutor as well as the other students of the class.

Due to time factor, the tutor had less time demonstrate to her students' ways of handling the young children which was crucial to early childhood education. According to Y, virtual meetings caused miscommunication. As time was limited, she could not discuss freely with course mates and tutors as before. That caused her could not understand well the requirement of the assignment and thus could not answer well for her assignment. She scored low marks. Before this, she did well in her courses.

Two participants, that is M and L's study was greatly affected due to financial problem. M lost her job as a departmental store staff and faced financial difficulties. She had to defer her courses. L withdrew from her course because during Covid-19 period, her health was affected and faced financial difficulties. Besides that, when she noticed many early childhood centres had closed down, she had no confidence to follow the Early Childhood Education course to become a teacher. Another participant, that is A, she lost her job as a kindergarten teacher too. Her brother supported her and she could continue her study.

Positive Impact

On the other hand, the participants gave the opinions that although there was negative impact, there was positive impact of the Covid-19 period on the progress of ODL ECE students in their academic studies too. They had more time for their study since they did not have to spend time going to the centers. They had their classes online and much time was saved. M took up four courses since time was allowed for her to do so. T found that she had more time to spend at home, more relaxed and could concentrate on her study.

F had the opinion that Covid-19 period enabled her to develop stronger self-discipline and time management skills. She had to plan well so that she could complete her assignment and attended online classes.

M was glad that she could learn new technology during pandemic period which was useful for her career. She was forced to learn it so that she could attend the classes which was very useful for her career.

The Coping Strategies of ODL ECE Students in Managing the Impact of the Pandemic on Their Academic Studies

For the unreliable internet connections that affected online classes, the participants used wifi or internet data to solve the problems. They tried to communicate with the tutors and course mates through WhatsApp.

The participants sought for help from their tutors, course leads and course mates through WhatsApp when they encountered problems with their assignments and the way to search for references. They thanked the course leads, tutors and their course mates for their help to guide them how to use the technology and application for online classes and also looking for references to do the assignments. According to the participants, the tutors were friendly and patient, always waited patiently for them to log in for classes even though they were late due to not familiar with the online system. Slowly they could manage and adapt to it.

Another problem that the participants faced was having financial difficulties due to retrenchment. A managed to solve the problem by getting help from her brother. A's brother helped to pay A's fees and so she could continue to study.

The participants' academic progress during the pandemic were not entirely as expected. The sudden shift to remote learning required adjustments. F adjusted her life by disciplining herself through attending classes, doing assignments, reading the reading materials, communicating with the tutors, peers and course leads. The Possible Implications for the University in Response to the Impact of the Pandemic on the Progress of the ODL ECE Students in Their Academic Studies.

During Covid-19 period, educational institution had been affected and the way of learning had been changed to fully online. In response to this, the administrative staff who were in charge of student's recruitment, library system management and online learning management had taken actions accordingly.

Director of a Regional Center

According to CH, the director of a regional center of the University, during the Covid-19 period, students were generally not IT savvy. They had problems in accessing and using the various types of technology application in university. The online classes were also an issue. Tutors were also not so IT savvy and gave rise to audio and video problems. Added to all these, the tutors used various platforms for classes ie. Googlemeet, Zoom, Teams which confused students. Tutors probably did not know how to manage online classes. Internet bandwidth for students & tutors also contributed to the problems. Assignments were new to the new students and they had problems with doing assignments. They were at a lost as to how to start off. Without the physical presence, these students were too shy to approach the tutors.

In order to help the students, each student was assigned a staff to take care of all their needs and also to personally attend to them from the beginning. Students were contacted individually by respective staff to build a rapport and hence, guide them but regional center staff are not academics and so the guidance from the academic perspective maybe lacking. However, definitely the lack of physical presence was an issue. A simple thing which we could have explained by showing them physically would sometimes take hours to resolve. Besides that, to help the ODL ECE students the University provided Computer Subsidy Programme (CSP) to provide students subsidies to

buy computers and also subscription to data plans. On top of that, the University also eased the payment of tuition fees as a few students experienced pay cut and some even lost their job. The alternative assessment which replaced examination, had helped many students in improving their grades and their CGPA. Academicians were very accommodating over assignment submission datelines as students were affected by COVID-19.

When asked about what the University administrative staff, course leads and tutors could do to help to lessen the hardships students face during the covid period, and also to assist in the academic progress of students, CH had the opinion that everyone should be more patient and understanding over issues faced by students as each student might face situations which were peculiar to them. This pandemic had caused many to be stressed (mentally, physically and emotionally) as it was something no one had ever experienced before and thus did not know how to manage. The system, Flexlearn was very useful to support students in self-directed learning. It was only that students were not familiar to its potential. Another major weakness in the Flexlearn was the response rate of various stakeholders to queries. Discussion platforms were not fully utilised to its potential. She suggested IT or computer lessons should be provided so that these students could be more IT savvy. Besides that, organise buddy-system among the students so that they can support each other.

Administrative Staff In Charge of Student Portal

SY who took charge of student online portal in the University, expressed her view that the University staff and the students depended fully on the platform. If some of them were not familiar with the function, they would encounter problems. During the Covid-19 period, the campus was still moving from the old platform to the new platform (FlexLearn). The old platform was called W Learn. It was a different system. When Covid hit Malaysia, we were in the midst of changing platform from W Learn to Flexlearn. For ODL ECE students who fully relied on the online platform, if they were not technical savvy, they might face some difficulties. When they were using W Learn, they have to come the campus at the regional center for tutorials. There were various regional centers. During the Covid-19 lockdown period, the University started to use Flexlearn. DECE was well managed by the programme lead and the course leads. Tutors could easily receive help from them. During the MCO period, there were a couple of ways that the University relied on. Firstly, the helpdesk ticket was used. Whenever students had difficulties, they put in the ticket. The IT Unit would answer to resolve the issue. The other way was by using the Flexlearn itself to help the students. A lot of guides for students were provided. There were multiple channels like MS team and emails were provided. The University started to use MS Team during the lockdown.

Besides that, the University also had student engagement unit. Their role was mainly to engage with students. If students had any difficulties, they could reach out to them. They responded mainly through WhatsApp. Before MCO the University already had this unit. Their role was getting important during the period of Covid-19. On top of

that, Flexlearn was a cloud-based platform which could reach almost anywhere without latency. Latency can be minimised tremendously.

Administrative Staff In Charge of Library System

The library administrative staff, B was interviewed. She supplied the information that basically before the pandemic, for the University ODL students, the students' usage of hard copy books was very low. They had been using the University digital resources. When the pandemic hit, by right it should escalate more but surprisingly it was not as expected. The usage increased but it was not very high jump. Thus, one of the challenges that faced by the library was more on educating the students on how to use the resources. So before pandemic, actually we could not really conduct Zoom workshop to them on how to use the library resources. I believe that they would not understand during that one-day orientation. The students still used Google to find resources. We managed to reach out, but was still very low number. We just focused on the new students. The students isolated each other to study on their own and to find materials on their own too. The request to the library only picked up after the second MCO. Then library started to get questions from students on how to find resources, even though they also knew how to use the databases more. During that period, the physical library was closed, so they did not have other places to go to borrow books. So, they did revert to physical resources. So one indicator is actually the University inter-library loan service. That one escalated. There were also request for the books that we did not have, where we had to outsource from other local universities.

For the DECE students, the focus of library for them was on the searching techniques, that was how to search the proper database, instead of using Google. At least they knew the University had this kind of education sources to support their learning process.

In the future, should there be similar kind of disruptions to students' progression or they cannot come to the library, communication is very important. Don't leave students alone. Many will end up studying isolation. So the proactive communication must be there from the management side, whether it is from the school. Course should initiate all that, and then get to reach out to the students.

B added on, for library side, management wanted to go 100% digital. That was the direction the University were heading. That means the library would provide everything, those textbooks, reference resources in a digital version if Covid hit. If could not get it in the University resources, still could link up with the local libraries. So that was the kind of collaboration the library was looking out.

VIII. DISCUSSION

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way of learning in higher education. Teaching, and learning activities that were usually carried out with face-to-face meetings had turned into virtual meetings (Simamora, R.M., 2020). Students and lecturers unable to meet in the classroom, and they must react to changing conditions by

having online learning. As such, like the other university students, the ODL Early Childhood Education students encountered disruptions in their studies. Just like Simamora(2020) stated in her study, the technical problems and individual problems that students encountered are the main challenges in online learning. The research findings show that the participants had difficulties in online learning. The Internet access is not stable, prone to breakdowns. This is the common problems faced by students (Jaspal Kaur, N. S. & Jagdave Singh, A. S., 2021). It shows that the students were not well equipped for online learning. They are not sufficiently prepared to use technology (Marin, E.,2022). Although digital education is not at all a new concept, technology being integrated and used during the educational system was a challenge. In view of this, the University concerned had taken the initiative provided Computer Subsidy Programme (CSP) to provide students subsidies to buy computers and also subscription to data plans. Besides that, the University also had student engagement unit to help the students. If students had any difficulties, they could reach out to them. Not only that, the University started to use Flexlearn which could reach almost anywhere without latency. A lot of guides for students were provided. There were multiple channels like MS team and emails were provided. For the unreliable internet connections that affected online classes, the participants used wifi or internet data. They tried to communicate with the tutors and course mates through WhatsApp. The students received support and guidance from the academic side too. The students were guided patiently.

The other negative impact that the students faced was lack of interaction with the tutor and the peers. This gave rise to lack of communication and collaboration in doing task for assignment. Some students also faced the stress of financial problems. Counsellors play an important role in this sense. The University should get more counsellors to give guidance to the students. The primary role of the counsellor during the Covid-19 pandemic is expected to be able to formulate individual counselling services that are in accordance with the needs of students today (Laily Puji Astuti, 2020).

The participants commented that online teaching was less effective and less interesting than face-to-face teaching. As such, tutors need to change their teaching strategies to be more effective towards ODL teaching. An effective online pedagogy is one that emphasizes student-centered learning and employs active learning activities (ASU, 2023).

Besides negative impact, there were positive impact too. Time was saved. The participants could take more courses.

Just like what was stated by Inchiparamban & Pingle (2016 in Simamora, R.M., 2020), online learning makes it possible for learners to take up a course without attending an educational institution. Learners get the benefit of taking up a course from their home or from any place they are comfortable. It also enables learners to get credible certifications, thereby, improving their qualifications, which, in turn, play an important role in career progression.

Online learning provides the opportunity to access subject matter from any location at any time.

IX. CONCLUSION

Covid-19 has compelled the educational institutions throughout the globe to comprehend, experience, and accept vast and quick change (Hung, et al., 2010). To solve technological problems, sufficient and effective access to the Internet and twenty-four-hour connectivity of the Internet are also needed. Second, interesting and practical online course design and content is very important. Sufficient explanations for the lessons and exercises are also required. Additionally, the planning and content of learning tasks must be evaluated and revised from time to time (Simamora, R.M.,2020). On top of all, more research should be carried out on online learning so that educators, lecturers and students who conduct online learning can solve the problems faced.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by Wawasan Open University under CeRI Incentive Grant.

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