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Open and Distance Learning (ODL): Preferences, Issues and Challenges amidst Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In times of crisis and the global spread of Covid-19 pandemic, the world has observed exponential growth of online education as educators and students are required to stay at home and resume with online learning entirely. With the new norms in education, come new experiences and challenges. The demands in online learning have pushed both students and educators to maximise their ICT skills and some to be unwillingly ready for the new normal. Students have no choice but to keep up with the requirements and challenges of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Thus, the purpose of this study is to describe the ODL experiences of tertiary students particularly their preferences, their views of the instructional technology as well as the issues that arise in the integration of their courses in the new online class structure. This study used a mixed-method approach whereby questionnaires were distributed to 68 respondents, and further open-ended questions were asked to gather insights regarding their overall views of ODL. The findings showed that aside from connectivity problems, most students found that online learning was difficult for them because they had a lot of distractions at home, which affected their focus, and understanding of the lessons. Thus, it can be concluded that most of the students perceived that Malaysian institutions and students are partially ready for ODL and more time is needed to adapt to the new changes which require empathy, creativity and a great deal of effort.

Keywords: Open and Distance Learning; Covid-19; online learning; ICT Skills; new normal

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has been in place since the introduction of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Blended learning has become a popular term in education systems around the world as traditional classes are complimented or 'blended' with online learning activities alongside with the development of technologies. A lot of positive findings have been found on the significant role of blended learning in higher education, especially in improving learning outcomes, communication and online skills (Azizan, 2010; Pape, 2010). Whether the learning process is purely conducted online or blended, online learning is a distance learning that has been a part of the education systems around the world to give extensive opportunities for students to learn without boundaries. Because of this exponential interest in open and distance learning, many

researchers are interested in finding out the effectiveness of online lessons and best online practices around the world (Nguyen, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the reasons why online learning has become a widely discussed issue is because of the effectiveness and benefits of online learning particularly in enhancing and improving student learning outcomes as well as dealing with limitation of resources in higher education (Nguyen, 2015; Pape, 2010). Its cost-effectiveness feature has made online learning inevitable, especially in tertiary education and professional development courses (Bartley & Golek, 2004; OECD, 2018). Many academics believe that online learning has been effective in reducing the cost of post-secondary education by spreading the cost of a class to cover a large number of students compared to the traditional classroom.

In the past decades, much research has focused on the effectiveness of online learning as compared to traditional face-to-face learning and the factors that influence the effectiveness of such education (Bowen, 2014). There are many studies that find positive impacts of online learning which include improved test scores, enhanced student engagement, stronger social connection and positive views on learning (Nguyen, 2015). It was also found that online learning allowed students to think and reflect about their learning and they had deeper understanding on their of the learning materials (Riffell & Sibley, 2005). Nguyen (2015) conducted meta-analyses on the efficacy of online learning and concluded that online learning is generally as effective as traditional learning even though there were a few studies with mixed or negative findings. She further recommended that researchers should move beyond the "no significant difference" result and pay attention to the diversity of learners in open and distance learning.

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 as pandemic on 11th March 2020, it had a serious impact on educators, students and institutions worldwide (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). Covid-19 had caused schools and institutions to shut down in order to flatten the curve of the pandemic. The sudden transformation leads to various issues and challenges (Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, & Glowatz, 2020). In a study by Adnan and Anwar (2020), they found that online learning failed to produce a desirable outcome due to limited access to the Internet as well as technical and financial issues. This is particularly common especially in underdeveloped countries. Furthermore, students also highlighted that response time, lack of face-to-face interaction and absence of socialisation were among the challenges of online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Zhong, 2020).

In Malaysia, most of the higher institutions have already practised online learning to supplement traditional face-to-face lectures, but the recent Covid-19 pandemic has forced institutions to do away with physical classes and continue with fully open and distance learning (ODL) as a result of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO). Public and private universities were required to discontinue any physical lessons, and the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia announced that this situation could go

on until December 31, 2020 depending on the current pandemic situation (Lim, 2020). However, things might not run smoothly as envisioned, and there are a lot of considerations that need to be taken into account in order to conduct efficient, fully online courses.

ICT facilities and resources have always been an issue and a tremendous challenge for the Ministry of Education in Malaysia since there is still a huge gap between urban and rural schools in terms of Internet connection and network resources (Jamil, Razak, Raju, & Mohamed, 2011). In 2013, data from the Centre for Educational Research Institute recorded that less than 20% of teachers in Malaysia reported using technology for students' class projects (OECD, 2018). Aggravated by the current Covid-19 pandemic situation, most institutions, educators and learners are forced to fully utilise Internet resources and upgrade their ICT skills in response to the requirement of fully open and distance learning (ODL) to ensure that learning still takes place in times of crisis. Students and educators have no choice but to keep up with the new norms and challenges of ODL. The question is, are Malaysian students ready for a full switch to a digital classroom? What are the experiences and challenges faced by the students in their midst of trying to survive from getting infected by the pandemic and continue with learning from the comfort of their homes? Is Internet coverage the main barrier to the success of online learning?

Mailizar et al. (2020) suggested that further research into students' views on the challenges and opportunities of online and distance learning during a pandemic needs to be conducted. Thus, the aims of this study are to describe the ODL experiences of tertiary students particularly their preferences, their views about the instructional materials, the issues that arise in their online courses as well as their overall perceptions of ODL. To date, there are still very few published data about the effects and experiences of fully distance learning during a pandemic in Malaysia. This study would contribute to the body of knowledge of empirical studies on the experiences of open and distance learning, particularly in times of emergency in the Malaysian context. This study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the online learning platforms do the students prefer?
2. How do the students perceive the ODL instructions and materials?
3. What are the students' problems in their ODL experiences?
4. What are the students' overall opinions and recommendations regarding ODL?

METHODS

The present study investigates and describes the ODL experiences of 68 tertiary students from a local institution in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, East Malaysia. The study used online questionnaires to collect data on the students' self-reflection of their online learning preferences, the problems that arise in their online learning experiences and their views of the instructional materials. Open-ended questions were used to probe for further clarification to get their overall opinion regarding the whole ODL situations which were then thematically analysed.

Sixty-eight (68) undergraduate students from both degree and diploma programmes were randomly chosen as the sample of this study. Forty-eight (48) out of sixty-eight (68) students were female students, whereas twenty of them were male students. Their age range was from 18 to 24 years old, and they were from six (6) different programmes which include Business Management, Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Tourism and Hotel Management, Accountancy, Applied Science and Plantation and Agro Technology. Only 15% of them were currently staying in rural areas, whereas the rest were from urban and suburban areas.

A questionnaire was devised and consisted of five sections which were Section A (demographic), Section B (ODL preferences), Section C (ODL instructions and materials), Section D (ODL problems) and an open-ended section on students' overall opinions of ODL (Section E). Section C and D consisted of 23 items measured by using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from one to five). Prior to the distribution, the questionnaire was pilot-tested and the Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient was 0.840. The data from the questionnaire were descriptively and statistically analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and the open-ended data were thematically analysed. Thematic analysis was done to identify any patterns or themes from the open-ended data. This allows the data coding and categorising process to expand following the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What are the online learning platforms do the students prefer?

Before answering this research question, let us look at the necessary information of the students regarding how they access the Internet for ODL. The figures below show the state of their Internet access, electronic devices used and time spent on online learning.

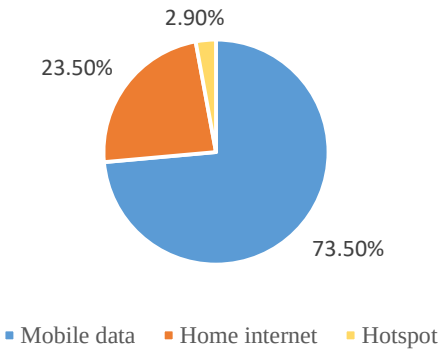

Figure 1: Internet access

Out of 68 students, 73.5% of them depended on mobile data while only 23.5% of them had home Internet or Wi-Fi connection. 2.9% stated they depended on hotspot connection from another person's Wi-Fi. Out of this figure, only 13.3% indicated that they had a poor Internet

connection and 55.9% of them had a reasonably good Internet connection. About 30.9% had no problems with their Internet connection.

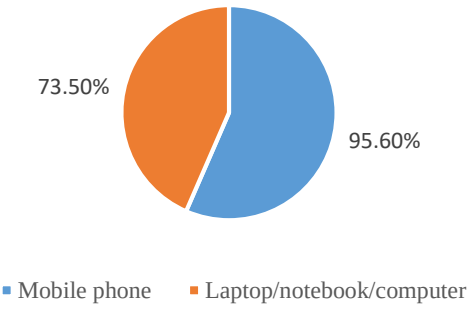

Figure 2: Electronic devices for online learning

As can be seen in Figure 2, almost all of the students (95.6%) used a mobile phone for their online learning. 73.5% of them also had a laptop or computer for ODL.

Table 1: Time spent on online learning

Duration	**Participants**
1 to 3 hours	10.3%
4 to 6 hours	33.8%
7 to 9 hours	38.2%
10 to 12 hours	13.3%
above 12 hours	4.4%

Descriptive analysis revealed that the students mostly spent from 4 hours to 9 hours a day for online learning. Table 1 above shows the time that they spent on online learning per day.

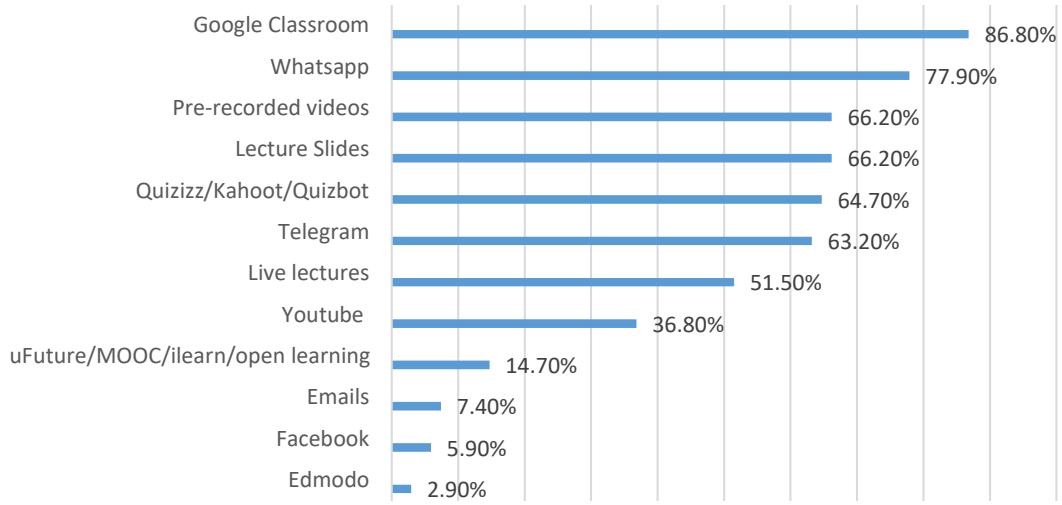

Figure 3: ODL platforms preferred by the students

Based on the analysis, it was found that the most preferred online learning platform by the students was Google Classroom (86.8%) and followed by Whatsapp (77.9%). This indicates that the students really like using Google Classroom and essential communication apps like Whatsapp and Telegram. When the students were asked further why they preferred Google Classroom, they mentioned that it is easier for them to manage and keep track of their learning tasks and activities. For Whatsapp, the students believed that it is the most common communication tool with the instructor and their friends due to the low bandwidth requirement of the application. In terms of instructional materials to deliver the content of the courses, the students preferred pre-recorded videos and lecture slides (66.2% respectively) because they claimed that they could watch the videos and notes anytime they want, and they can watch it as many times as they want to understand the lesson or learning content. Only slightly more than half of the students preferred live lectures and this is because they probably need more mobile data to join or participate in the live classes.

RQ2: How do the students perceive the ODL instructions and materials?

Table 2 below summarises the students' perceptions of ODL instructional technology. Likert scale was used to investigate the extent to which they agree or disagree with a particular statement.

Table 2: Participants' perceptions of ODL instructions and materials

No.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I can join and participate in most of my online classes	1	6	24	31	6
2	I am aware of the details regarding the course assessments	3	4	23	31	7
3	I prepare a checklist of what I should do before or during the lesson	3	12	28	21	4
4	I am given enough time to complete the online activities	1	14	28	21	4
5	I receive clear instructions from the lecturers regarding the online tasks	1	9	28	26	4
6	I receive sufficient feedback from the lecturers	0	8	29	27	4
7	I feel that the lecturers are accommodating to the needs and limitations of the students in ODL	1	7	26	27	7
8	I think that online learning is hard for me as a student	3	4	18	26	17
9	I feel that my workload for online classes is higher compared to when I am learning face-to-face	2	1	16	23	26
10	I think ODL is effective in helping me to understand the course content/materials	9	17	35	5	2

What can be highlighted from the findings is that more than half of the students (37 out of 68) had no problems in participating in the online classes. Only about 7 of them could not participate in most of their online courses (one strongly disagreed, six disagreed). This statistics is quite similar to their awareness about their course assessments. In terms of the time given for them to complete the online activities, only 15 out of 68 participants believed that they were not given enough time to complete their tasks. The rest thought that the time given was sufficient (25 out of 68) and some felt neutral about it (28 out of 68). In terms of instructions and feedback given by the lecturers, only 8-10 participants thought that they did not receive clear instructions and useful feedback, whereas 58-60 of them did not have problems with the instructions and feedback. Most of them also thought that the lecturers were accommodating to their needs and limitations. However, when asked whether they believe online learning is difficult for them, 43 out of 68 students agreed on this statement and 18 of them felt neutral. The participants also agreed that their workload for online learning was much higher compared to face-to-face learning (49 out of 68). This is because most courses have converted their final exams to separate on-going assignments. As a result, the students had to complete more tasks than they usually do with face-to-face learning.

The last statement received an interesting response from the participants, where 26 of them perceived ODL as ineffective in helping them to understand the course content and materials. Only seven agreed that ODL is effective and 35 of them felt neutral on this aspect. This finding is quite similar to the study conducted by Adnan and Anwar (2020) where they found that half of their respondents reported that it was impossible to effectively complete the courses through distance learning due to technical and financial issues. The study also found that the students had difficulty to do group projects via online learning. In this current study, the students had similar reservations regarding online learning. As the results suggest in RQ3, students' personal issues and unstable Internet connection partly contributed to this neutral feelings about the effectiveness of online education. As Adam and Anwar (2020, p.49) stated, "The sudden shift from traditional classrooms and face-to-face learning to online learning has resulted in a completely different learning experience for students".

RQ3: What are the students' problems in their ODL experiences?

In order to answer this research question, participants were asked to rate the extent of how often they faced specific problems. The scale is as follows: 1- never; 2- a few times a week; 3- half of the week; 4- almost every day, and 5- every day. Figure 4 below shows the students' problems in terms of Internet connectivity, network signal and speed of the Internet.

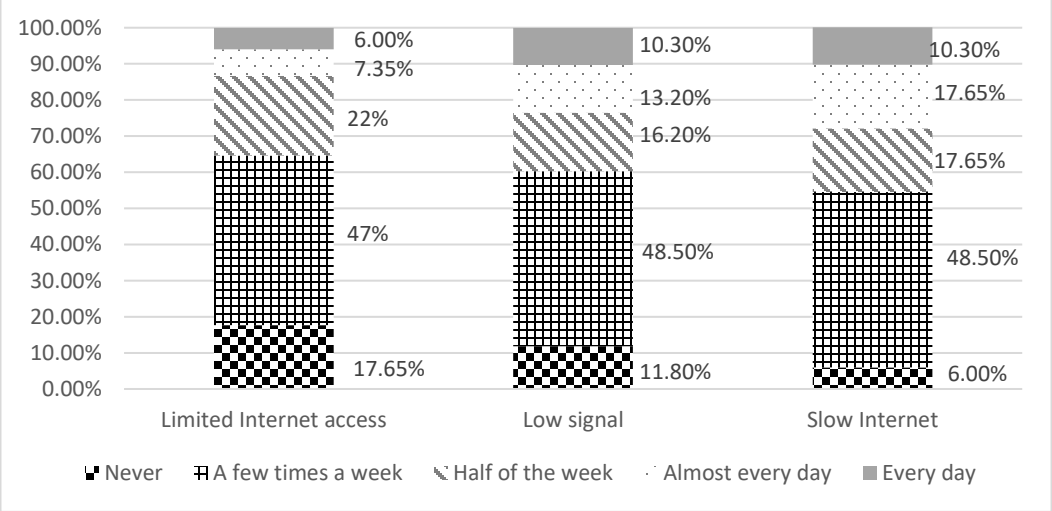

Figure 4: Problems in Internet connectivity

The results show that almost half of the students faced problems with their Internet connectivity that happened a few times a week. Less than 20% of them had Internet connection problems almost every day. Only about 6% to 10.3% of them had a severe problem with Internet access and network coverage every day. This indicates that even though they had connectivity problems, most of them were still able to participate in the online classes as discussed in RQ2.

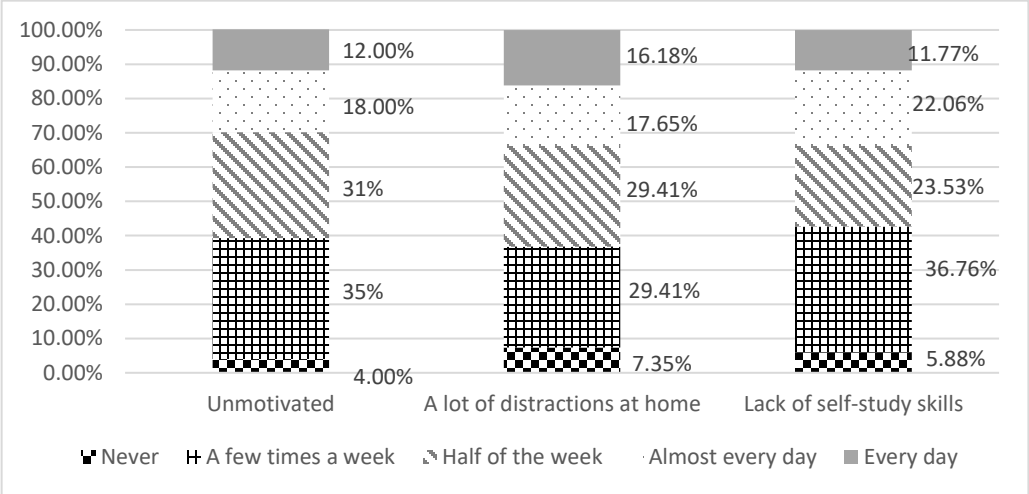

Figure 5: Personal issues

The findings in Figure 5 show that the students were experiencing personal issues like feeling unmotivated, having a lot of distractions at home and lack of self-study skills more frequently compared to connectivity problems. 35% of them felt unmotivated a few times a week, 31% felt unmotivated half of the week, while another 30% felt unmotivated almost every day and every day. This could be related to the problem of having a lot of distractions at home every day (16.18%), nearly every day (17.65%), a few times a week and half of the week (29.41% respectively). The findings suggest that the students might feel unmotivated because of their responsibilities at home, unstable Internet connection and also due to their home environment. This will be discussed further in RQ4. Another possible explanation is that the time devoted by the students to actively engage in online classes was lower in comparison to the time devoted to attend a physical class. As stated by Kellin Wong, a caretaker of Universiti Malaysia Sabah's student representative council in an article by Lim (2020), some students may lack the motivation and interest to participate in online lessons due to a lack of self-discipline or because they prefer face-to-face learning. This finding contradicts the finding found by Feeley and Parris (2012) in which they found that specific online pedagogical tools produced better learning outcomes and improved learning motivation.

Figure 5 also shows that 94.12% of the respondents also experienced lack of self-study skills, which ranged from a few times a week to every day. This indicates that students need to work on their self-discipline and self-study skills. The absence of real-time sharing of ideas, knowledge and information could also create a void in online classroom interaction, which makes it difficult for the students to complete their group tasks (Zhong, 2020). The findings seem to reiterate the claims by Lalima and Dangwal (2017) who believed that online learning demands efforts, the right attitude, substantial budget and highly motivated teachers and students for its successful implementation.

RQ4: What are the students overall opinions and recommendations regarding ODL?

In order to answer this research question, open-ended questions were further asked to gauge the students' perceptions of the overall ODL process. The students were asked about their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, as well as their recommendations on things to improve to ensure better ODL experiences and to ensure the success of its implementation.

In terms of the advantages of online learning, most of the participants believed that ODL is cost-effective and flexible in terms of time and pace of knowledge. The participants thought that ODL saves cost because they do not need to pay for transportation fees, rental and food since they can study in the comfort of their home. Below is a sample excerpt from a student, S4, who described the benefit of ODL as cost-saving.

> *It saves my costs cause I do not need to pay for transportation, rental and food since I was home. (S4)*

Other students like S7 and S25 described the benefits of ODL as giving them more time to understand the lectures. They, like other students, believed that ODL gives them the flexibility of time and they can learn at their own pace. If they could not understand a particular lesson, they can watch the pre-recorded lecture any time and as many times as you want to get familiarised with the content.

> *For me, it is easier to understand the lesson as I can search for the things (e.g. words, terms) I don't know during the class freely. Pre-recorded videos helped a lot as I can watch it a few times for revision to understand the lesson better. The time is also very flexible. (S7)*

> *When lecturer gives you screen record slide, you can view it as many [times] as you can so that you can understand more, I guess. (S25)*

Some of these students also believed that ODL has made them learn how to discipline themselves in terms of time management.

With regard to the disadvantages of ODL, three main problems were identified, which were poor Internet connection, distractions and difficult to understand the subject matter, especially when it comes to computing subjects. For instance, student S3, S5 and S34 mentioned that their main concern was their poor Internet connection because they could not join the live sessions or could not focus in the lessons because they were worried about their Internet connection.

> *For me, the major disadvantage is based on my Internet connection. I have a problem with my Internet connection because it was so poor. Not only that, but my Internet connection also can disappear suddenly. (S3)*

The Internet connection is not always good, so when there is a test or quiz, the student can't focus since they are worried about the Internet connection. (S5)

A total disadvantage for me because of poor Internet connection that makes me unable to join the live online class and to access information on Google. (S34)

Aside from the Internet connection, some students also felt stressed and demotivated because there are a lot of distractions at home. They mentioned that they had other responsibilities as their parents or guardian had to go to work, and they had to look after their siblings.

As I live at home with family, there are a lot of distractions because I need to help with house chores. Sometimes the signal in my area is weak, it bothers live classes (Google Meet) as I can't hear the lecturer, and sometimes I can't join the class. This affects my understanding of the lesson. But so far, all my lecturers are very helpful. (S7)

It can lead to depression among students. Every day I have an assignment to do. We should be in the online classes at the right time, but I have to do all the work at home, including cooking, because I've no mom at home since my parents already divorced. I've to take care of my sister's child also, all of this makes me stress and tired every time. I'm tired to be sad every day. If I am at college, it could be better than this. (S23)

This shows that some students could not adapt with ODL due to the distractions they had to face and the responsibilities that they had to carry at home. The students also believed that different people have different circumstances and suggested that lecturers or instructors need to empathise with students' environment at home. They were struggling to understand the learning content while trying to survive the conditions at home.

With all these concerns, the real challenge is for students, lecturers and the government to work together to ensure the smooth running of ODL. The students recommended that lecturers should be more flexible about the submission time for assignments and reduce the number of workloads that they have to do. They also suggested that fun and interesting games and quizzes enhance their understanding of the subject as they enjoyed doing these activities the most. They also believed pre-recorded videos are the most helpful materials as they can watch the videos repeatedly to understand a particular topic. For subjects that require calculation, students suggested for more materials and sessions showing the step-by-step calculation on the board or paper. As proposed by Brown and Liedholm (2004), varied materials and tools, types of assessments, structure of learning communities and students' active engagement can affect the learning outcomes of distance learning. Nguyen (2015) also concluded that researchers and educators should focus on personalised online learning environments that will help to ensure the most efficient and effective learning for different types of learners. This signifies that online learning instructions and resources should be varied enough to cater to the different needs of the students.

CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to understanding the ODL experiences of tertiary students, especially after the government decided to do away with physical learning until the end of 2020 due to Covid-19 pandemic. The results highlight the preferences of the students for applications that require low bandwidth and easily accessible such as Google Classroom, WhatsApp, pre-recorded videos and lecture slides. Even though the students had connectivity problems, the students were still able to participate in most of their online classes. However, the unstable Internet connection and personal issues led to a feeling discouragement of the students to actively engage in online classes. In addition, though the students believed they had sufficient time and feedback for their tasks, they perceived ODL as difficult because their workload was higher than traditional face-to-face learning and they had a lot of distractions at home which affected their understanding of the learning content.

To conclude, the participants perceived that Malaysian students are only partially ready to adapt their learning behaviour to ODL and similarly, they also believed that higher institutions in Malaysia are partially ready for purely open and distance learning. This suggests that there are still a lot of considerations to take into account to really ensure the success of a full switch to digital learning. Aside from the students' concern on their Internet access and ability to participate in the online learning, the students also need full support from parents and the instructors since empathy or compassion has become crucial in this time of crisis. Students need to be given a personal space and time to focus on online learning entirely and at the same time being tolerated by the lecturers if they need more time, materials and guidance to complete their tasks. Nevertheless, ODL requires the students to have high self-discipline and be resourceful for their self-learning. More time is also needed to adapt to the new changes which require empathy, creativity and a great deal of effort. As Kim and Bonk (2006) put it, the journey of online learning requires an understanding of the current state and the future direction of open and distance learning. Hence, higher learning institutions need to consider the needs of both students and educators to meet the growing demands of ODL in the coming years.

It should be noted that this study was conducted at the early periods of ODL when students were still familiarising themselves with the ODL system and different means of information and communication technology. Thus, further research with a bigger sample size needs to be conducted after the completion of the first phase of fully open and distance learning in Malaysia. This is imperative so that improvements can be put forward to embrace the inevitable online tertiary education in the future.

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