

## THE RISE OF NEW NORMS IN COVID-19 CRISIS: LEARNING BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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### ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has been around us for over a year and due to massive restrictions, many nations are still struggling to formulate an ideal education system. As a result of the emergency outbreak, the education system is compromised and this has a direct impact on both instructors and students. The latter were found to experience more significant challenges to continue learning in this crisis, and this requires eclectic strategies for the system to properly function again. Since the number of Covid-19 cases surges every day in Malaysia, it is critical that we address the most pressing concerns that students are currently facing when online learning is abruptly employed to substitute face-to-face (FTF) education. Thus, this paper identified specific challenges faced by the students of Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, as well as the opportunities that came with the disruptions that were predicted to be used as optimal ways to receive and distribute online learning information successfully. In this study, 70 participants took part, and the data was gathered through a structured interview that was recorded on videos. The findings demonstrated that, despite the challenges, learners are gradually accepting these new standards, provided suitable learning techniques are used in the education system.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, ODL, online learning experience, online learning strategies

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in China in late 2019 and quickly spread worldwide, huge adjustments were made in various sectors, including the economy, social structure, and education (Tria, 2020). This lethal virus is difficult to contain because it can spread fast in a matter of minutes by droplets (coughs and sneezes) or by contacting infected surfaces (Toquero, 2020). The

simultaneous rise of cases in all countries caused worldwide disruptions, crippling the world's economy and normal practises all at once (Karalis, 2020). Most leaders switched to communal quarantine, restricting everyone's bodily movements and activities.

Several countermeasures have been implemented in response to the problem, including social separation, travel bans (Pather et al., 2020), and the shutdown of all educational institutions. Many people were severely afflicted by this virus, which first appeared at the end of 2019 (near to China's Lunar New Year), when hundreds of people were seen travelling about on vacations. According to Wu and McGoogan (2020), enclosed spaces such as aeroplanes, airports, trains, and buses have become important catalysts for the virus's propagation, explaining why the number of cases has risen so quickly. In disasters like Covid-19, movement restrictions were regarded required as an effective countermeasure. In this pandemic period, new lifestyles have quickly replaced our traditional practices by adhering to new standards and limits to maintain the long-term viability of our social structure, daily routines, economy, and educational system (Habersaat et al., 2020).

Malaysia is one of the first countries to adopt complete online learning to meet the demands of the education system in offering excellent learning content in this pandemic era. There were, however, a few oversights, and many individuals were not ready to embrace this new normal. Many of the instructors' resources were difficult to find, and problems to online learning began to rise, slowing down the learning process. Students have faced significant stress as a result of the move from traditional to virtual learning activities, particularly those who reside in remote areas with limited Internet connectivity and a lack of digital learning tools and equipment (Setiawan & Iasha, 2020).

### *1.1 Research Objectives (RO) and Research Questions (RQ)*

Since new norms have been adopted as our learning strategy, we intend to explore whether this method provides any challenges to our university students, especially as higher learning institutions have transitioned to the digital realm. We aim to look into the possibilities that our students see due to this new learning technique and identify the difficulties to these new norms. Thus, there are three research questions that we would like to answer in this paper:

1. What are the challenges of online learning faced by UiTM CPP students?
2. Is there any new knowledge acquired by UiTM CPP students through online learning?
3. What are the appropriate platforms and tools to be used by UiTM CPP students in their online learning?

## 1.2 Problem statement

Even though challenges are foreseen, and looming uncertainties might degrade the students' performance, a fast response to change is the key to success. Even if not all students have the necessary learning resources to participate in online classes, quickly adapting to new standards aids in the effectiveness of online learning. Online learning (OL) or open distance learning (ODL) is not a new phenomenon for digitally sophisticated countries like the United States, Japan, and Korea. These countries have demonstrated the effectiveness of online learning and the multiple advantages it can provide to both students and educators, as well as the educational system as a whole. Despite living in a pandemic era like Covid-19, education in these locations has the capacity to grow with suitable approaches and resources.

However, in Malaysia, owning even a basic laptop with fair access to the Internet is already a luxury to some students. Apparently, the emergence of this virus heralds the complete adoption of online learning. Therefore, all students in all institutions and levels are expected to participate in maintaining the sustainability of our educational system. Because many students are not completely prepared in terms of location, Internet connection, and devices, numerous difficulties have arisen due to this sudden practice.

As a result, this research is required to identify the students' individual issues throughout their online learning experience, particularly during rapid transitions. The findings are expected to develop feasible ways to overcome the challenges of delivering online information in the future without negatively impacting students' learning performance or motivation. Given the growing body of literature on how the Covid-19 outbreak is altering the world's education system, this study aims to fill in the gaps by examining UiTM CPP students' online learning experiences and their ability to readjust and begin practising the new norms in this pandemic period.

## 1.3 Limitations of the study

Attending online lectures, submitting assignments, and taking online examinations and quizzes may not be equally burdensome for all participants. Despite the fact that a large number of online learning platforms have been proven to be useful in assisting both instructors and students in accessing learning content, users are limited in their ability to explore and enjoy their full potential due to poor Internet connections and devices incompatibility. As a result, those who have exhausted their online learning resources may be unable to contribute to the conclusions of this study on online learning difficulties. Instead, more opportunities and discoveries are expected. Furthermore, only 70 students were selected as study participants, and thus it is impossible to represent the whole UiTM students.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many countries began enforcing movement restrictions as soon as Covid-19 became a global concern, and social distance became one of the most important instructions for preventing Covid-19's spread. In one study, Waiho et al. (2020) identified several levels of restrictions orders in Malaysia, starting with Movement Control Orders (MCO: March 18 till May 12, 2020). Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO: May 4 to June 20, 2020) and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO: May 4 to June 20, 2020) followed (RMCO: June 10 till August 31, 2020). While it is considered that the government's major goal is to prevent the virus from spreading, the consequences would undoubtedly affect those in numerous sectors, including small and medium companies (SMEs) and education.

The conundrums to providing education to the learners have become another unresolved issue for many educators when they are not ready to fully utilise technology as part of their teaching strategy. In 2003, it was found that online education can only be practised when everyone in the system has synchronous access to both devices and the Internet (Levy, 2003). During the early days of Covid-19 and when online learning was initially introduced in the Philippines, uproars erupted among instructors in colleges and universities due to a lack of information about creating content and distributing it through online platforms (Toquero, 2020). It illustrates the identical situation in Malaysia, where teachers were inundated with exaggerated information about online content, forcing them to make a quick judgement on what to provide their students (Allam et al., 2020). Despite having a lot of options, their lack of knowledge made it difficult for them to choose the ideal online learning method for their students. Although Jin (2017) demonstrated in his study that online learning may readily boost student collaboration and motivation, unfortunate circumstances such as these can easily cause stress among students and teachers.

On another note, even though not all students were affected by the new norms during the Covid-19 pandemic, the transition to online education could threaten those underprivileged, whose devices and Internet connection have always been a barrier to their learning performance. This notion is expanded in one study by Doyumğaç et al. (2020), who observed learners who had restrictions in technological resources have failed to use all of the benefits that the online materials and platforms could offer. This situation is similar to Adnan and Anwar (2020) described in their research of economically disadvantaged learning communities in Pakistan and how online learning was regarded as a challenge rather than an opportunity. They discovered that learners were under a lot of stress because the learning environment was less accommodating due to various distractions. Even while online learning can lead to a variety of positive results, Figueroa et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of first establishing a suitable online learning environment because various distractions, such as domestic chores and noises, are typically absent in a more formal setting. To put it another way, if this kind of depressing environment prevails, all of these flaws are likely to degrade learners' learning performance and motivation.

Online learning in UiTM started approximately 15 years ago when its first Learning Management System (LMS) known as i-Learn, was introduced. Following this, the university remained steady to continue learning on digital platforms, which is when “Week without Walls” was introduced. According to Soo et al. (2019), “Week without Walls” is a week of lessons that can be conducted outside the classroom’s physical space. Chung et al. (2020) delineated that as soon as the full enforcement of online learning began, UiTM launched another LMS, namely UFuture, as one of the LMSs to supplement the previous i-Learn system. The instructors became more familiar with digital tools, and the most popular digital application used by the instructors is WhatsApp Messenger, followed by Padlet, Google Classroom, Quizziz, Edmodo, and YouTube. Although some complaints surfaced, various training workshops were conducted to instil the right momentum to proceed with this initiative.

Apparently, any use of digital tools and technology can connect us to many terms related to online learning. These include flipped, flexible, blended and open distance (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Despite the seeming difficulties in organising, administering, and receiving education during the pandemic Covid-19, many countries have used this as an opportunity to investigate alternate sets of abilities in areas such as virtual reality and cutting-edge technology. Crawford et al. (2020) investigated the effectiveness of technological infrastructure in several countries’ implementations of online learning. Online content such as video productions and online lectures was widely circulated, with approximately two million instructional minutes generated and distributed in Italy alone. This strategy allows users, especially learners, to access the educational resources without requiring them to stay online with their instructors, and the content can be explored at any time of their convenience. Mukhtar et al. (2020) also concurred with this idea and presented in their study that online learning helped to ensure remote learning. By offering students with convenient access to their instructors and instructional resources, online learning became more manageable. It also cut travel costs and other expenses while simplifying administrative responsibilities like lecture recording and attendance tracking. Throughout the lockout, both students and teachers agreed that online learning increased student-centeredness. As a result, the students have evolved into self-directed learners who can learn asynchronously at any time of day.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research design and instruments**

This study used a qualitative research method in which the participants took part in a structured interview. A few interview questions were provided on the participants’ Google Classroom, and they had recorded their responses accordingly. They then posted the videos to their individual Google Classrooms. We analysed the videos to obtain the participants’ perspectives on Open Distance Learning (ODL) during the academic term from March to July 2020, as video recording has been an effective qualitative research instrument (Penn-Edwards, 2004).

#### **3.2 Participants**

We recruited seventy UiTM CPP diploma students as the participants of this study. All of them were 18 to 20 years old, which consisted of 19 males and 51 females. At the time of conducting

this research, they were UiTM CPP students from the Faculty of Hotel & Management (HM110 and HM115) and Faculty of Health Sciences who were doing their Diploma in Nursing (HS110). A clearer view of this information can be seen in Table 3.2 below:

<b>Age</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
18-20	70	100
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	19	27%
Female	51	73%
<b>Programme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Diploma in Pastry Arts	21	30%
Diploma in Hotel Management	27	39%
Diploma in Nursing	22	31%
<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Hotel & Management	48	69%
Health Science	22	31%

Table 3.2 Participants' demographic information

### 3.3 Sampling Method

According to Ilker et al. (2016), gathering data from readily available subjects is the main objective of employing convenience sampling. Thus, we used convenience sampling in this study, and all of the participants were our students during the March to July 2020 semester. Because they were all under our supervision, we had complete access to their video recordings, which had been uploaded to their respective Google Classrooms.

### 3.4 Data collection

We posted three interview questions on Google Classrooms for the participants to record their thoughts. Before they began recording, they were given a whole day to plan and construct their responses. The recording for the following day was completed promptly, and they were required to send their videos to their respective Google Classrooms. We received 19 videos in all, with each participant recording his/her thoughts separately and then compiling the recordings into one video per group. Each group was made up of three to four people. Our interview protocol pertaining to ODL is comprised of four questions:

- i. What are the barriers of ODL that you are facing this semester?*
- ii. Are there any opportunities or new skills that you have learned through ODL?*
- iii. Is there anything that you would like to suggest to improve your online learning experience?*

### 3.5 Data analysis

The information was obtained through video recordings that the participants submitted to their Google classrooms. This study included three research questions. To make sure our analysis could answer them, we analysed the data by looking at certain target areas, as expressed in our interview questions. We examined the responses by referring to the keywords discovered in earlier studies (please see Section 2 of this study), which have become the most prevalent challenges and opportunities in online learning. The keywords were afterwards matched to the responses to identify ‘who mentioned what’ and ‘how many mentioned what’. Since we did not limit how many ideas should be mentioned by each respondent, the percentage could not account for 100% for all criteria. Please refer to Table 3.5 below for further details:

Table 3.5 Areas and keywords in data analysis

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Investigated areas</b>	<b>Keywords</b>
1. What are the challenges of online learning faced by UiTM CPP students?	i. What are the barriers of ODL that you are facing this semester?	i. Disadvantages of online learning	- poor Internet access, outdated devices, poor communication skills, remote areas, poverty, low-income families, distractions, inexperienced, stressful situation, learning experience
2. Is there any new knowledge acquired by UiTM CPP students through online learning?	i. Are there any opportunities or new skills that you have learned through ODL?	i. New skills ii. Effective learning materials	- time management, collaborative learning, video production
3. What are the appropriate platforms and tools to be used by UiTM CPP students in their online learning?	i. Is there anything that you would like to suggest to improve your online learning experience?	ii. Effective online learning platforms and tools	- LMS, learning materials, online tests, online quizzes, online assignments, social media, WhatsApp Messenger

Glass and Hopkins (1984) as cited in AECT (2001) mentioned, qualitative descriptive analysis allows us to collect information related to the events that will later be organised, tabulated, and represented. By categorising and analysing the responses according to specific keywords, we were able to identify the participants’ perceptions of their learning experience.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Challenges of online learning

The results of this study will be discussed based on the research questions stated in the first section of this paper. The first research question is related to the challenges faced by UiTM CPP students in online learning. We tabulated the data into four categories: the challenges, factors, consequences, and the number and percentage of students who faced the problems.

Table 4.1.1 Online learning challenges faced by UiTM CPP students

Challenges	Factors	Consequences	No. of students & percentage
1) Ineffective learning method	Lack of face-to-face interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Less classroom engagement</li> <li>● Heavy workload</li> </ul>	60% (42 students)
2) Higher chance of distraction	Lack of supervisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Higher tendency to partake in other non-academic activities (social media/ online games)</li> <li>● The inevitability of household tasks and responsibilities</li> </ul>	30% (21 students)
3) Poor Internet connection	Bad weather conditions / living in rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Inaccessible online classes</li> <li>● Late submission of assignments</li> </ul>	70% (49 students)
4) Outdated/ incompatible devices	Low socioeconomic status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Inconvenient access to online learning materials and assessments</li> </ul>	27.1% (19 students)

According to the findings, 70% of the participants believed that the most challenging aspect of ODL was a poor Internet connection. Participants stated that they disliked using online platforms that required high Internet bandwidth, such as Microsoft Team, Webex, or Zoom because they found it difficult to attend and stay in live lectures and finish their assignments or tests on time. The ineffective learning experience was followed by 42 out of 70 participants believing they were unable to engage successfully with their classmates throughout the class. Because most online class assignments had to be performed separately without the support of their classmates, this obstacle resulted in less classroom involvement and larger stress. As a result of multiple instances of delay in completing classroom activities, this situation resulted in a high burden. The predicted



keywords along with some unfavourable attributions such as ‘difficult’, ‘stressful’, ‘annoying’, ‘crying’, ‘sad’, ‘boring’, ‘hard’, ‘late’, ‘slow’ and ‘left behind’ were discovered in the videos.

The participants also claimed to experience a higher tendency of distractions at home. 21 students stated that staying at home allowed them to engage in non-academic pursuits. Words and phrases such as ‘social media’, ‘YouTube’, ‘online games’, ‘noises’ and ‘household chores’ were spotted on their videos. Finally, 19 participants stated that incompatible or outdated electronic gadgets hampered their learning process due to their low socioeconomic class. This particularly happened when some online learning activities demanded the usage of up-to-date and high-tech devices such as the latest versions of laptops and computers. We came across these phrases in the videos such as ‘sharing phones and laptops’, ‘topping up mobile data’ and ‘parents are still waiting for the salary’, which verified the difficulty of online learning. Table 4.1.2 below shows some of the verbal responses by the students.

Table 4.1.2 Participants’ responses on ODL challenges

Student A	<i>It’s difficult to complete group tasks as we are all in different places and we can only depend on online communication to discuss on our group tasks.</i>
Student B	<i>I feel a bit stressful when it comes to online classes as the Internet connection at my place is always unstable.</i>
Student C	<i>I need to explain to my mother about my online classes and assignments as my mother always asks me to help her with the house chores.</i>
Student D	<i>I have to buy my mobile data almost every week to ensure that I could join the online classes.</i>
Student E	<i>When submitting the assignments/tests, I will always be the last person to submit or submitted the task late and I need to explain to all my lecturers about this.</i>
Student F	<i>I feel sad when I need to ask my parents to buy me a new device for my ODL as I know that they have not received their monthly salary.</i>

#### 4.2 Useful platforms and tools in online learning

This section aims to answer our second and third research questions. The findings can be found in the graph below.

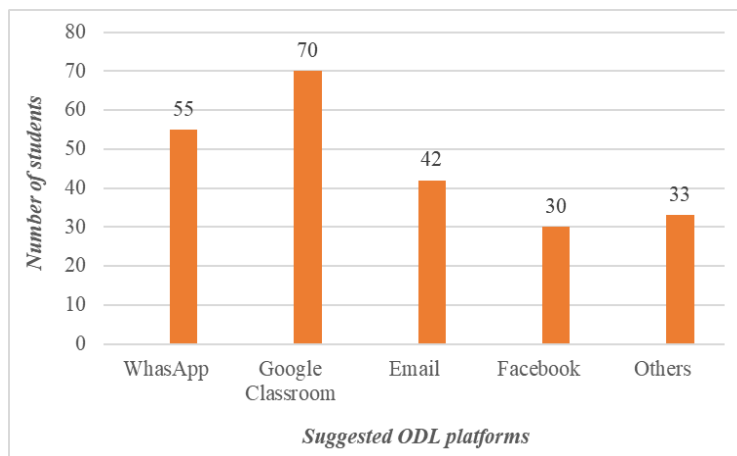


Figure 4.2.1 The appropriate platforms to be used during OD as suggested by UiTM CPP students.

Due to low Internet bandwidth usage, most of our participants favoured WhatsApp and Google Classroom as their online learning platforms while some of them preferred to use Email and Facebook. They also added that they preferred learning materials such as PDF, Word, PowerPoint and recorded lectures since they can be accessed easily and do not require them to be online constantly.

The participants described the opportunities they acquired through OD in their videos, and one of the most important benefits is the potential to develop their technological skills. Students learnt to explore more online learning tools and programmes and recognise more important computer functionalities through OD. They learned how to use Microsoft office tools and how to access and upload files to Google Drive, as well as how to create videos and post them to web platforms, because most assignments and classroom activities were typewritten. Thus, many positive attributes were mentioned to verify the usefulness of online learning. The phrases like ‘fun learning’, ‘easy access’, and ‘learning anytime’ came across in the videos frequently and were mentioned by most participants. Some of their verbal responses are presented in the table below:

Table 4.2.1 Students’ responses on the benefits of OD (improving skills)

Student A	<i>I found that OD is not that bad as I could easily access to my lecturers notes and can listen to recorded lectures many, many times and at any time I want.</i>
Student B	<i>I learned many new skills especially related to ICT during the OD classes. There are actually a lot more functions in Microsoft office that I don’t know before this, but</i>

	<i>now I know!</i>
Student C	<i>It's more fun when we could be more flexible during ODL. We don't really have to move anywhere else for classes, just sit in front of the PC. It saved a lot of time.</i>
Student D	<i>Oh, I love making videos for my ODL assignments! I could improve on my video-making skills.</i>

The participants also expressed their excitement when they got the opportunity to explore multiple online learning platforms such as Padlet, Testmoz, UiTM's U-Future, Google Classroom and Microsoft Team. Finally, the participants agreed that online learning has taught them to be more responsible, independent, communicative, and collaborative as they have learnt to overcome obstacles and manage their time more efficiently. Some of the verbatim responses can be found in the table below:

Table 4.2.2 Students' responses on the benefits of ODL (learning experience)

Student A	<i>It's interesting to know that there're actually a lot of online learning platforms that can be used for ODL such as Padlet and Testmoz.</i>
Student B	<i>I learn to be more responsible during this ODL as I need to manage my time doing my online works as well as the house chores.</i>
Student C	<i>Before this, I always need my friends to remind me about the assignments. Now that we are staying at home, I learn to be more independent and set the reminder on my handphone so that I won't forget about any assignment or test.</i>
Student D	<i>I can always refer to our lecturers' notes/instructions on Google Classroom if I forgot about the lessons learnt or the tasks given in the previous class.</i>

## 5. DISCUSSION

The most challenging scenarios encountered by learners while online learning are poor Internet connection and incompatible gadgets, according to this study. This supports the findings of Doyumğaç et al. (2020), who found that when technology resources are limited, many of the advantages of online learning may be limited. Although Jin (2017) demonstrated in his study that online learning can easily boost student collaboration and motivation, our findings revealed that online learning may not be of much use when the users are mostly unskilled and inexperienced, as it prevents them from taking advantage of the extensive benefits of this digital domain. Because many of their classroom exercises could not be finished on time, 70 percent of our participants thought that online learning was stressful.

The participants have also faced trouble establishing effective collaboration with their fellow classmates, which was hindered either by poor Internet connection or their lack of online experience, as confirmed by Levy (2003). The study found that online engagement could only

happen if everyone in the system had access to both devices and the Internet at the same time, which not all of our participants appeared to have. Despite the fact that few of our participants were in conducive learning circumstances, 30% of them stated that distractions at home could hamper their learning. This situation also supported the findings of Figueroa et al. (2020), who found that not all classroom activities can be coordinated without a formal area for more excellent communication between students and teachers.

Despite a few noteworthy drawbacks, online learning provides significant possibilities to our participants. They thought they were getting more familiar with online learning tools and honing their computer and technology abilities. They were able to identify specific learning platforms that are appropriate for their online learning, which are WhatsApp, Google Classroom, e-mails and Facebook. Besides the online learning platforms, the participants also identified the most accessible learning materials they preferred are recorded lectures which was confirmed by Crawford et al. (2020) as a popular medium that allows learners to access educational resources without being required to stay online with their instructors.

The participants' positive attitude towards autonomous learning continues to surface when they have become more disciplined, independent, well-organised, cooperative, and communicative. Despite facing several movement curtailments in this Covid-19 outbreak, the participants affirmed that online learning provided an abundance of opportunities to strengthen their bonds with their peers, which was materialised through collaborative learning. Like Mukhtar et al. (2020) presented in their study, although the learners are not physically near to one another, online learning improves student-centeredness. As a result, the learners evolve to manage their time wisely to find the right time for their discussion sessions to complete any specific classroom tasks and collaborate according to everyone's convenient time. This situation eventually gave them more space to become more understanding and considerate individuals.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

To summarise, it is critical to recognise that online learning requires a reasonable amount of time to be adapted and adopted by all educational institutions, instructors, and learners in order to sustain a continuous process of educational opportunities. This research examined UiTM CPP's first semester online learners and it was determined that online skills could not be mastered in a short amount of time. Before learning and becoming familiar with relevant technology resources, we believe that regular usage of online tools is essential. As a result, users may uncover new options to simplify and smooth the process of online education as they get more familiar with online resources.

We could also deduce that online learning is indeed exacting and necessitates significant changes to present instructional techniques during online instruction. We have also seen abrupt changes have taken a toll on some users, especially the new ones who are not familiar with the online domain. Thus, this circumstance allows us to understand what is and what is not suitable for students with certain online disabilities. However, just like any other learning process, the difficult phase can eventually pass when appropriate actions are taken at the right time. Thus, after some time, we have witnessed that the learners have finally embraced the outstanding benefits of online learning and even though not all online platforms were experimented, the learning outcome could still be achieved at the end of the semester.

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