



Please cite this article as: Victor, S., Arif, A., Yusuf, S., & Chaniago, R. H. (2022). Online Learning Condition During Covid-19 Pandemic among Public University Students. *The Asian Journal of Professional & Business Studies*, 2(1), 10–15.
<https://doi.org/10.61688/ajpbs.v2i1.6>

ONLINE LEARNING CONDITIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Received 31 Mac 2021, Revised 30 April 2021, Accepted 20 Mei 2021, Published 30 June 2021

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to unexpected changes in all Institut Pengajian Tinggi Awam (IPTA) operations. During the lockdown, there was a sudden shift in the educational system from face-to-face instruction to online instruction. Studies have shown that progress in online learning and teaching is considerably more successful if all students have access to a conducive and healthy learning environment. Thus, the present study seeks to determine the level of online learning conditions during the pandemic among IPTA students in Malaysia. A total of 410 students between the ages of 18 and 32 from 20 IPTAs were randomly selected to participate in the study by answering a series of survey forms. Several factors, including insufficient access to appropriate ICT devices, constant internet disruption, and a lack of enthusiasm or motivation to study online, contributed to the study's findings, which indicated a need for improvement in the level of online learning conditions among university students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, students who received appropriate information from their educators and perceived the enjoyment and usefulness of the learning sessions will have greater advantages in dealing with learning processes during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to students who did not share the same feelings and treatment.

Keywords: MCO, online learning condition, learning environment, public university

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to determine the level of online learning conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic among IPTA students. In line with the technological development that we experience, the progress of e-learning technology provides training, teaching, and learning of better quality (Masrom, 2007). Consequently, the education field is seen to be reasonably evolving as an effect of it leading to a refined future education by taking into consideration the new vision brings in terms of learning skills and knowledge trends (Hussin, 2018). Subsequently, the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to implement online learning for students nationwide. This urged institutes to develop revised course content, delivery, and assessment approaches while maintaining the initial course objectives to sustain the continuation of education for students nationwide.

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) also guided higher education institutions as they revised their content to suit the pandemic (Mohamad Nasri et al., 2020). However, this news received mixed reactions as issues such as Internet availability and demographic differences arose. Filius et al. (2019) and Bao (2020) believe that embarking on online education requires significant planning and proper investment. Therefore, the shifting phase of educational progress has brought uncertainty and distress to students. Accessibility to a high-quality online learning environment adds significant information transfer between teachers and students for knowledge and instructional material (Stosic & Stosic, 2015). Solely having the means for distance studies will not suffice, and the condition of online learning for students must be conducive to encouraging and inhibiting quality learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Malaysian government took actions such as implemented a nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18th of March, 2020, onwards to control the virus outbreak and mitigate the pandemic. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Malaysia decided to pause all face-to-face lectures and urged all higher education institutions to delve into online learning to control the pandemic. As an alternative to the traditional face-to-face educational approach, most local universities have implemented online learning for their students. This urged the institutes to come up with a revised course content, delivery and assessment approaches while maintaining the initial course objectives to sustain the continuation of education for students nationwide.

Online learning through electronic devices with internet access became the alternate learning method due to the spread of this disease, which resulted in the closure of face-to-face classes. Online learning or distance learning is defined by Moore and Kearsley (1996) as a learning environment where students along with lecturers or teachers are separated by distance and occasionally by time. Online education is a process in which students and teachers establish interaction and communication in relation to course content through Internet-based learning technologies (Curran, 2008). Berge (2007) reported that technology is here to stay and has become an essential need in handling educational or instructive needs to develop society's level of knowledge.

Effective online learning requires a variety of approaches because the use of technology, content design, learning assessment, and practices differ in online settings compared to conventional ways (Fayer, 2017). Online learning has been implemented in both synchronous and asynchronous environments. These learning methods have brought freedom in learning as they connect teachers anywhere they want (Singh and Thurman, 2019). Synchronous and asynchronous are the two modes of online learning that depend on the optional interaction timing (Finkelstein, 2006; Abdullah, 2011). Synchronous online learning implies interaction between lecturers and students during class via video conferencing or chatrooms, whereas asynchronous online learning refers to creating opportunities for lecturers and students to interact before and after online classes via emails or discussion threads (Selvanathan et al., 2020). According to Stoetzel and Shedrow (2020), online learning is a type of learning method conducted through the Internet, so teachers and students do not need to be physically present or face-to-face during the learning process.

Online learning provides benefits for independent learning and for developing new skills in the process of leading an age-long learning (Dhawan, 2020). Online learning is often known via multiple addressing and terms such as web, online learning, or instruction via computer assistance. Berteau (2009) believes that some experts stand by the notion that online learning serves as a way of teaching that consists of multiple technological integration that are sought while some were of the notions that the substitution of distant education is facilitated by Internet application as a way of effective and rapid communications. Some researchers agree that online learning provides flexibility in the learning process and students' motivation (Tesar, 2020). In addition, universities introduced online portals with available courses and embarked on efforts to enhance e-learning worldwide (Chen 2010; Yengin et al. 2011; Shahzad et al. 2020).

A study by Woo and Kimmick (2020) showed that discussions about adopting online learning have been time-consuming and difficult, as has the attitude towards online learning. Murphy (2020) inferred that the online education system is new but will evolve to be as effective as traditional methods. In addition, Hussin (2018) states that online learning, self-direction, and flexible learning regardless of time and place are enabled through accessible online platforms and tools. Multiple obstacles have been raised in relation to online learning. Ertmer (1999) recognized barriers compromising first- and second-order barriers. Hardware, access, and technical support are classified under the first-order barrier, while the second-order barrier often relates to pedagogy, belief, or personal preferences. Another scholar, Pelgrum (2001), identified two classifications for online learning. The first category refers to material barriers, which are related to the lack of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) resources, and the second category refers to non-material barriers, which are related to teachers' knowledge and skills.

To combat the pandemic, online learning seems to be the most effective method for continuing the learning process. However, the learning process was a struggle for some students due to poor online learning conditions and lack of interaction. In Sabah, Malaysia, 52% of students do not have proper access to the Internet due to a lack of infrastructure ('52 Peratus', 2020). In addition, limited Internet accessibility makes it difficult for students to communicate with their lecturers, interact with their friends, and access laboratories, which affects their studies (Selvanathan et al., 2020). Multiple students and educators are inexperienced in utilizing technology for online education during the pandemic (Doyumğaç et al., 2020). Therefore, inadequate information and communication technology competency hindered online education during the pandemic. This study is based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989). This would allow this study to understand the level of online learning of IPTA students during the pandemic.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative approach. The design of this research comprises a correlational study using the survey method, where the online learning condition is treated as a variable. Responses from 427 IPTA students aged 18 to 25 were collected using a simple random sampling technique. The sample of the participants was drawn from a population of 584,576 students (Statistik Pendidikan Tinggi, 2020) from 20 IPTA across Malaysia, as the required sample size in accordance with the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table is 384. The questionnaire was distributed online to the participants.

The survey instrument was based on the constructs validated by Davis (1989) and adapted to the context of this study. The survey included perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and behavioral intention, comprising 12 questions on a 5-point Likert Scale. A pre-test study was conducted, and Cronbach's alpha was found to be .931 for the online learning condition, reflecting a good level of reliability. After data cleaning and screening, 410 data points were usable. SPSS version 26 was used to analyze the data. The reliability of the actual test was also recorded. A descriptive analysis was then performed to determine the level of the variables.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Level of Online learning Condition (n=410)

Level	Percent	Mean	SD
Online Learning Condition		2.256	.580
Low (1.00 - 2.33)	6.8		
Moderate (2.34 - 3.66)	56.6		
High (3.67 - 5.00)	31.0		

According to Table 1, the level of online learning condition during the Covid-19 pandemic among IPTA students was low, as the mean was 2.256 (SD=.580). It can be deduced that despite the introduction of online education into the Malaysian Education Blueprint of 2013-2025, Malaysian IPTA students' online learning conditions are at a low level, as they are still facing difficulties in adapting to the shift. This is in accordance with the research of Filius et al. (2019) and Bao (2020), whose outcomes suggest that entering online education requires significant planning and proper investment. This would further ensure a better online learning experience for the students. This is in line with a study conducted by Efriana (2021), which may be due to the shortages faced by educators in terms of understanding the subject material to deliver it online, their inability to use technology as they were unprepared for online education, followed by the limitations faced by students in terms of inadequate device availability, low enthusiasm or motivation towards embarking education online, and shortage in terms of internet access, showing a need for improvement in this condition.

In addition, the TAM used determines the acceptance and adaptability of online learning conditions for IPTA students. The findings suggest that the inability of ease of use and usefulness significantly affects the behavior of using technology, which consequently affects the motivation towards learning and communication effectiveness. Similar to the study by Salloum et al. (2019), which determined the acceptance of e-learning, perceived ease of use is affected by computer playfulness for e-learning. The study also showed that information quality, perceived enjoyment, and accessibility significantly affect perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness.

5. CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought drastic and unexpected changes to educational progress. As a nation that focuses on the educational development of students as a dire need to improve the nation to a better state, it is important to continuously understand the greater good this shift could bring. This shift should be well utilized for it to be incorporated into the education system when Covid-19 is no longer a concern. Both educators and students' viewpoints should be considered to improve the educational standards of Malaysian students. In conclusion, this study shows a low level of online learning condition during the Covid-19 pandemic among IPTA students. However, at the data collection stage, the implications of online learning were still in the early stages for many students nationwide. Subsequently, it is important to track the progress of online learning conditions and students' responses to them as timely as possible. At the same time, the Technology Acceptance Model 1 has greatly accommodated this research's need to obtain feedback by interceding to understand the level of online learning in terms of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, subsequent behavioral intentions, and actual usage of IPTA students. Moreover, ways to make online learning useful for students should be emphasized to help improve course productivity. In addition, online learning is found easy for most students; therefore, better outcomes should be considered to incorporate this into the education system post Covid-19 pandemic as well.

Future studies should explore other stressors that affect online learning conditions, such as mental health, technology

literacy, financial status, and family background. These stressors may also play an important role in the learning conditions of students nationwide, thus the need for an in-depth study on this matter. In addition, an in-depth study to address the educators' viewpoint should be conducted to understand their grasp of online learning condition during the Covid-19 pandemic. This subsequently helps improve the educational progress of both parties. Moreover, studies to improve students online learning conditions need to be undertaken as the nation is still observing movement control order while education is still implemented online. Future research is encouraged to comprehensively understand the conditions of online learning in depth, as the current study is limited to descriptive analysis.

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