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Higher Education at the Crossroads of Disruption: Phenomenological Insights into Malaysian Experience

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Abstract

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic has abruptly changed many facets of the global civilization, upending everything in its path. Everything has been affected, not only the education industry, which has witnessed some unexpected shifts in many different corners of the world. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malaysian Higher Education initiated the use of online learning or e-learning with technology and devices as a communication mediator to replace face-to-face learning. The abrupt transition from face-to-face to online learning has brought many challenges to instructors and students. Thus, this study is aimed to describe the lecturers' experience and perspectives in dealing and addressing the various challenges with the sudden educational shift triggered by the pandemic in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. A phenomenological approach was employed through adoption of semi-structured in-depth interview via Microsoft Teams with two respondents. The findings from the interview were transcribed, coded, and analysed thematically according to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis framework. It is found that although lecturers do aware of the implementation of online education, they are not necessarily ready and prepared to face the real situation when changes happen drastically. Further study is needed to answer the question arrised for better understanding.

Keywords: COVID-19, disrupted settings, Higher Education, lecturers' perspectives, Malaysian experience

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past three years, we have been bombarded with news about the deadly virus known as Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Vergnaud, 2020). Due to the pandemic, there is no exception to every country in the world, including Malaysia. In term of the national security, the safest ways are issuing Movement Control Orders (MCOs) at multiple phases. As a result, various sectors are affected by these drastic changes, including the higher education sector, involving both public and private universities, community colleges, and polytechnics that has affected a number of "1.2 million in higher education institutions, including some 130,000 international students" (cited in Kamil & Sani, 2021, p. 113). This results a transition in the educational landscape in a very short period of time, involving the shift from face-to-face interaction to content sharing through online media and "open education practices" (Burgos 2020; Huang et al. 2020; Intelligent Learning Institute 2020). Kamil and Sani (2021) also add that while online learning having advantages in term of lowering costs, time and environment flexibility, there are still few barriers and challenges that need to be addressed that impacts in the style of teaching and learning process that will be carried out (Luthra & Mackenzie, 2020) by proactively using the technology in the lesson preparation, including projects, group work, presentations, and assessment. Thus, this study is aimed to describe the lecturers' experience and perspectives in dealing and addressing the various challenges with the sudden educational shift triggered by the pandemic, which involving (i) lecturers' readiness and preparedness, (ii) the academic burden that was faced by the lecturers, and (iii) pedagogical approach that were used by the lecturers.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a consequence of the pandemic, the teaching and learning process is pedagogically shifted from conventional methods to a more flexible approach (Mishra et.al., 2020). Traditional education approaches are decreasing and being replaced by the new era educational approaches such as "distant learning, mobile learning, personalized learning, flipped and blended learning, social collaborative learning, and game-based learning" (cited in Demir, 2021, p. 1). However, these drastic changes indirectly interfere with the development of the education system and has an impact on "education and training approaches, methods, practices, and tools" (Kabir, Islam, & Deena, 2020; Demir, 2021). Nevertheless, DeCapua (2016) and Custodio and O'Loughlin (2017) also mentioned that disruptive educational settings should be adapted because they are considered "assets for progress, performance improvement (cited in Affouneh & Burgos, 2020, p. 13). In addition, with the help of high internet speed and cloud computing technologies, it allows the collection of information and communication to run smoothly and create a more interactive and independent educational potential (Demir, 2021). Although online learning is seen as part of the "new normal", some may agree that online learning is less effective due to the lack of human touch, which prevents lecturers from forming engaging and meaningful relationships with their students (Chung, et al., 2020).

On top of that, it is also undeniable that lecturers need to find a way to create an ideal formula that can prepare students to face challenges that may hinder their learning process (Moran, 2020). Regardless of that fact, the well-being of lecturers was at time overlooked in order to prioritise the well-being of students to ensure that their academic performance is not affected (Brewster, et al., 2021). Brewster et al. (2021) also added that the increament in workload and productivity demands brought by the rise of technology used at the higher education level is closely related to increased work-related stress, burnout, and mental health difficulties. Besides, lecturers are also faced with problems related to sudden shift from traditional learning to online learning. Apart from trying to adapt to the new normal of education, lecturers too need to deal with issues related to students' shortcomings like social inequity and digital divide which prevented them from participating in online classes due to lack of stable Internet connection and devices, low family income and incondusive learning environment at home (Kaur & Bhatt, 2020; Moralista & Oducado, 2020). Furthermore, another prevalent challenge that higher education instructors need to face is academic dishonesty that often occurs among students (Ferguson et al., 2022), which includes "cheating in exams and academic assignments, committing plagiarism, and falsifying information or citations" (cited in Sediq et al., 2021, p. 3840). Burgason et. al., (2019) stated that some of the ways students committed academic dishonesty during online exams is by opening and hiding browser windows as a means of searching for answers on the internet, accessing images and text from cellphones or smart watches. Online truancy also became a rampant problem as students not only have the tendency to skip online classes but also failed to complete any asynchronous learning tasks given to them (Mahyoob, 2020). Academic misconduct is caused by several factors like "knowledge gap" in which some students experienced difficulties in accessing information related to their studies, lack of policy and rules and regulations related to academic misconduct during remote learning and lack of assistance in supporting students' different learning styles (Gamage et al., 2020).

To overcome various issues and challenges that are related to online learning during crises, higher education instructors need to apply various strategies that could enable them to support students' online learning as well as increasing their efficacy and preparedness level in designing instructional activities that are not only engaging and meaningful but also inclusive (Khlaif & Salha, 2021; Mahyoob, 2020).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach by conducting a semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams with two senior lecturers from the Engineering Faculty and Citra Centre, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. During this New Time, online interview is perceived to be most convenient method in gathering qualitative data. Researchers and informants are no longer constraint by geographical location as video conferencing tools have been widely available and accessible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Having interviews is a useful method to generate rich and thick characterisation throughout the data collection process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Gibbs, 2018). In addition, conducting an interview allows a research to explore "someone else's mind" and perspective (Patton, 2015, p. 426). Semi-structured interview was chosen due to its flexibility approach for gathering data as the interview questions are open-ended that allows the researchers to explore the participants naturally (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). It offers opportunity for the researchers to explore pertinent areas to the study as well as the allowance to develop a rapport with the research participants through casual interaction (Doody & Noonan, 2013). A positive relationship between the researchers and the respondents is important as the researchers may use probing technique to gather a much richer and thicker data as well as ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 2000). The interview questions were guided by the research

objectives, focusing on the pedagogical practices at higher education during time of crises as well as exploring on the recommendations in using digitalized pedagogy which proves to be more sustainable and future-ready. Prior the interview sessions, the researchers have prepared interview protocols (IP) for the session to guide the researcher while managing the interview processes.

3.1 Data collection and analysis

The interview took place from 9th June to 13th June 2022 and each interview with the participants lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. The duration of the interview depended on the willingness and readiness of the respondents to share their experiences. The interviews were conducted in dual languages; *Bahasa Melayu* and English. The interview session was later transcribed. The data extracted from the transcripts was analysed manually. To analyse the transcript, open coding was first done by breaking down the data into relevant categories; initial or axial coding, where categories were refined, developed and related; and selected coding where the central categories were tied together and related to other categories (Morse & Richards, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, the coding process needs to be systematic, insightful and rigorous. A researcher needs to have a clear insight of the raw data and avoid leaping ahead and foreclosing the analysis of the data. Rigour is also highly instrumental as researchers maintain "a systematic engagement with meaning and patterning across the entire dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 54). When interpreting the data, Creswell (1994) suggests for the researcher to be objective and critical and acknowledge any subjectivity while immersing oneself into the data in order to better understand and interpret the data. The interview transcripts and the code labels were later examined according to "inductive thematic analysis", in which themes or patterns are identified with the data set "are strongly linked to the data themselves" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The process of theme development of the interview findings was based on the 6-step thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2006) (see Table 1). To ensure trustworthiness of the formulated themes from the transcripts, peer-checking strategy was adopted to determine the accuracy of the translated themes (Whiting & Sines, 2012). A collaborative effort between the research assistant and the research team was conducted during the process of coding in which suggestion of changes and modifications of the codes were done repeatedly until the whole research team managed to resolve any differences, thus able to arrive at a consensus of the finalised themes.

Table 1. Phases of thematic analysis

Phase		Description of the process
1	Familiarising yourself with the data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2	Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3	Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4	Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5	Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6	Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

(Source: Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

However, in thematic analysis, Sundler, et al. (2019) stated that the clarity of its approach is not fully evaluate by other researchers in term of phenomenologically. They also added that "in hermeneutic phenomenological traditions, thematizing meaning can be understood as related to the interpretation of data, illuminating the underlying or unspoken meanings embodied or hidden in lived experiences" (cited in Sundler, et al., 2019, p. 734). According to Hallett (1995), the phenomenological approach has two important elements, which are rational and intituitive processes that focus on participants' experiences, which allows researcher to explore results beyond "the factual accuracy than the plaussible of an account" (cited in Cypress, 2018, p. 304).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Lecturers' readiness and preparedness

During the pandemic, we are aware that the pedagogical approach is very challenging for lecturers, especially for classes that require physically meeting such as engineering students who expected hands on assessments that involving laboratory work and calculations. According to respondent A, she mentioned that,

> *"... during pandemic time where everyone is shocked. Then, even when we asked lecturers to teach online, they refused. It's not possible they said, especially engineering that has a lot of calculations and some of them even asked how to teach this ..."*

This statement also been agreed by Respondent B in saying that,

> *"... It is undeniable that there are some learning sessions that need to be first-hand and physically meet, that have lab work, or even the co-curriculum that is related to sports and cultures ..."*

Although as a person who has the authority to make decisions, Respondent A must comply with the order given by the government based on the Standards Operation Procedure (SOP). She also expressed her remorse for not being able to assist the lecturers in terms of physical presence on campus by saying that,

> *"... we cannot do something because we are not allowed to come. Not given. [hesitating] meaning if [stuttering] we want to come we must ask for special permission related to the purpose of attendance, cannot come in large numbers, with distancing according to the requirements of the SOP at that time ..."*

Respondent B also have the same view by sharing his opinion in this matter,

> *"... we just follow the instructions given. The university had to close ... That is when the little hiccup happens ... But we manage to settle it down ..."*

Regardless, Respondent B also stated that the matters related to the transition of educational system should be familiar to the lecturers in terms of concept, philosophy, and approach because it has been highlighted by the Ministry of Higher Education. He states that,

> *"... when the pandemic hits, it just speeds up everything at the far front, which is all. So, whether you like it or not, ready or not, your device needs to be change, you need to have 4G or 5G internet. So, for those who have 3G, handphone that do not have camera, or outdated really cannot survive ... It is about readiness and then how you equipped yourself ... It is all about readiness and preparedness in every angle. The technologies, the people, and the infrastructure itself ..."*

In addition, if we connected with the question of lecturers' readiness and preparedness, respondent A does state that UKM give a lot of training regarding online teaching method and platform to use as follows,

> *"... the university does provide that kind of support for lecturers to teach online. A lot. Use Ms Teams or create your own videos and upload them to our e-learning system. So, there are many ways and platforms that can be used. [hesitating] ... So, in terms of staff, I think ... if in this learning and teaching matter, UKM has a lot of training ... for the lecturers for online teaching ..."*

Besides, Respondent B also emphasized on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy training among senior lecturers due to the fact that they do not have the skills to use current technology used in the education sector when answering one of the question given, which is "What kind of training should be given to educators especially the senior educators in order to prepare and enable them for future crises?". He mentioned that,

> *"Internet of things and it is related to learning by doing ... let say we do a challenge for the senior lecturers, which is uninstall Microsoft office and see whether they can survive or not by doing so ... now, mostly people running google cloud, google slides, Canva. That is the challenge for the senior lecturers. The "learning by doing" ... there is no longer chalk talks, where we ask if they understand, they will answer "yes". But when we asked to do, they failed. So, there must be an acid test ... But of course, in a big university or any other universities, there must be some resistant ..."*

Moreover, the lecturers' readiness and preparedness are not only in terms of technological expertise, but it is also closely related to their emotional response which is also influenced by the personal commitment borne by the lecturers. Respondent A stated that,

> *"... Even there are lecturers who seem to insist on coming to the faculty, some say they can't focus at home ... especially for those young lecturers. It is understandable, at the same time as the meeting, they have to take care of their children ... sometimes there are also those who share a computer with their children. So, we will bring those things [stuttering] to the faculty and discuss with the management ... I think the faculty has given [stuttering] consideration"*

In conclusion, even though lecturers are aware of the implementation of online education that has been highlighted by the Ministry of Higher Education, they are not necessarily ready and prepared to face the real situation when changes happen drastically as experience during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Some lecturers also refuse in handling an online learning due to their awareness in terms of pedagogical challenges, but they have to force themselves in adapting and adopting with the transitions that happened during the crisis.

4.2 The academic burden that was faced by the lecturers

Due to the lack of readiness and preparedness, physically and mentally, among lecturers with the transition in education that occur, they face several academic burden when it is associated with students. Respondent A stated that the challenging part is when it is involved with students' mental health. She mentions that,

> *"... lately I see many students who always claim that they have anxiety ... students now are not strong in facing problems ... Whether personal, family, or financial problems ... If in the past, there are rarely students who used to be [stuttering] even now the cases where students say they want to commit suicide, that thing seems to be quite common. It used to be hard to hear like that ..."*

Respondent B also states that,

> *"... these are the things that if you put 100% online you really cannot get it. Students cannot gage the learning outcome ... the lecturers are the one who have to make the first move. The students [stuttering] should be ready and follow ... Both parties have to play their roles. But I do believe that proper planning by the lecturers will assist ..."*

Additionally, the condition of students also plays a big role, not only in terms of mental health, but it also affects student engagement in class, which becomes a burden to the lecturer to ensure the stability of both factors. Respondent B states that,

> *"... we cannot deny that students also have various categories. We have B40, M40, and T20. All of this played a significant role in determining the impact of the learning ..."*

While Respondent A adding support to the statement issued by Respondent B by saying that,

> *"... with situations at home that are not necessarily conducive to learning. So, it can also be one of the reasons why students find it difficult ... and then it will affect their level of academic achievements ..."*

Because of the fact that the differences in students' social status, family background, and personalities, lecturers are also faced with the problem of getting students' attention during the online classes. Respondent A mentions that,

> *"... if online it's kind of difficult ... to get that attraction ... Even during the [stuttering] presentation, what we did was to ask them to prepare a video first to avoid technical problems ... then there was a question-and-answer session ... but in these matters, it was quite difficult for lectures. I also face the problem of [stuttering] how to make sure they really pay attention ... for me to ask a lot of questions ... if face-to-face we can see and go to them. But when online, if we ask, it's like we're the only one there. They are just silent and doesn't give any answer ... there are also, some lecturers ... make pop quizzes or games ... which is good to get students' attention."*

However, lecturers also expressed dissatisfaction with the burden that they have to bear, which it does not stop here. The burden also involves the attitude and integrity of the students in carrying out the tasks given. Respondent A states that,

"... it is a common to get a complained regarding the group assignments, there is also a free rider. Usually, during the face-to-face classes used to exist as well. After all, when it's online, it's still like that and they [stuttering] really express their unsatisfied ... any member who really has a sense of responsibility to complete ... In the end, it was buried alone ... you already stressed during the covid era and that is added to the stress ..."

Respondent B also expressed his thought related to the students' attitude and integrity. He states that,

"... When they write a long essay, there is when the plagiarism happened because they tend to copy and paste from Google ... sometimes the lecturers themselves do not have enough time to check all the assignments given ... [hesitating] if the lecturers want to give a feedback to every students it would be not enough time."

In conclusion, the duty of a lecturers is not only to teach and educate, but it also involves the lecturers' observation of their students' academic performance, whether they are in a good condition to implement the pedagogical approach that carried out during the pandemic

4.3 Pedagogical approach that was used by the lecturers

Due to the evolution in pedagogical approach from traditional to modern, from whiteboard to screen, and from physical classes to online classes. Lecturers need to come out with a new method of approach that are compatible with the current developments. According to Respondent B, he stated that,

"The most important is creating a short task rather than giving a long paragraph of assignments. The same goes for notes. From there we have social media such as TikTok, Instagram etc. ... So, these short tasks are being [stuttering] it is very helpful in terms of students' learning process .... From there they will build up their confidence ... we train the students to always be ready ... and of course it must be related to the assignment ... It is quite typical. I mean, the printed assignments have to be lessened, we are no longer dealing with that. But to the same extent it is not until there is nothing at all because they still have to produce the printed one when in the job scope ..."

Respondent B also underline that with the use of social media nowadays, indirectly sharpen students' writing and cognitive skills by indicating that,

"... How do you summarize things, how do you put it into a context, and what do you want to deliver from the image. This is what we call a copy writing. In copy writing we do not need to put a long paragraph because it is a very impactful statement. So, these are the skills that [stuttering] students should master with the world today ... you should be able to convey the idea in a copy writing form. So, this is what we call as submission in the new era ..."

Apart from that, Respondent A also indicate that there are other approaches that have been used in order to gather students' attention and understanding, by maintaining a conventional approach that is adapted according to the suitability of the new era approach. She does mention that,

"Some are simulations ... we also have a video that is uploaded for students to watch first ... and then interact with them by holding a question-and-answer session on things that are not understood, or maybe holding a quiz for them to answer, and we also have data from the last session as an assessment later need to be discussed with their classmates"

However, according to Respondent B, this new era pedagogical approach also has its own limitations by saying that,

"... we have to brief the students that is the art of doing things and there is a restriction. For instance, in a movie making sometimes when it comes to the brands, you must blur it, [stuttering] meaning the angle of third-party damages ... you have to be careful and there are also the dos and don'ts. It is not simply as you go there, record everything and done. The students must know the art of doing the tasks ethically. So, that is what we say [stuttering] the worrying part to the students. Sometimes when they are doing the tasks, they also do not aware if they are doing it right in term of copyrights or any human rights ..."

Moreover, when it comes to online education, it must be closely related to the internet network where the connection becomes a challenge not only for students, but also for the lecturers. Respondent A mentioned that,

> *"... by using my iPad... at the same time in Ms Teams ... I can scratch and scribble, it will be displayed later in Ms Teams ... it also can be recorded and uploaded ... perhaps the students can re-watch the video for revision use ... It's just that there is a little constraint [stuttering] it also depends on our Wi-Fi. There he is kind of lagged ..."*

Furthermore, Respondent B also suggest eliminating the examination in the tertiary level. He notes that,

> *"... It is fine for the quizzes because it is progressively. Examination actually killing the students' creativity ... because you are playing with the time. It is very unfair for the students and then [hesitating] you did not produce a streak smart student; you are producing a bookworm ... It would be always assignment, presentation outputs etc. ... it is a project based, specific assignment types ... whether they can do it or not ... when the students understood what they learnt, it is easier for them ..."*

From here we can identify that both respondents have different method of pedagogical approaches. According to Respondent A, she indicates that,

> *"... personally, indeed the best is face-to-face because of the human touch [hesitating] even though we are now moving towards digital etc. But I don't think we can deny that human touch. meaning here [stuttering] computer cannot understand the heart of a person, consideration, body language ... But we've been through a pandemic, and we've learned too ... even though we are now almost back to normal ... we also encourage lecturers to do face-to-face at least four times. So, the rest can be made online ... [hesitating] we can try to combine it ..."*

Contradictory, Respondent B indicates that he would suggest an Experiential Learning and Competency-based Education Landscape (EXCEL) Framework form the Ministry of Higher Education, which is based on four core items, (i) Research Infused Experiential Learning (REAL), (ii) Industry Driven Experiential Learning (IDEAL), (ii) Community Resilience Experiential Learning (CARE), and (iv) Personalised Experiential Learning (POISE) (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021) to combat with crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. He also mentions that,

> *"... The students will spend more on ... the 4 core items in this framework ... [stuttering] the presence of students in the university or their dependency is very less, and they are more attached to the real world ... So, we are running away from the traditional education system ... This is what we called a future ready curriculum. There are no longer the "Graduate on Time" terms used. When you imposed graduate on time ... It becomes a hindrance factor for the students because they only focused on their studies ... all these things actually killing the future ready curriculum ... It is not to the extent no classes at all, but we have to keep that to the minimum."*

Nonetheless, both respondents agree with the fact that different programme have a different pedagogical approach although they have been exposed to the modern educational systems. Respondent B states that,

> *"... To some extent, I do agree that some programmes are not the same and cannot be done digitalized. There are some programmes that [stuttering] still using traditional way of learning ... but, I would say [hesitating] in term of percentage, maybe about 70% to 80% should be done online. In term of deliverable, tasks, assessment, and feedback system. Just remain the balance for the physical or psycho-motor related, and it always "learning by doing" ..."*

In conclusion, although online education is a change that is a challenge for lecturers in determining the method of pedagogical approach, it is also seen as more flexible although less effective in terms of human touch, which includes consideration and body language.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis that have been done, this research clearly illustrates the lecturers' experience and perspectives in dealing and addressing the various challenges with the sudden educational shift triggered by the pandemic. Although lecturers do aware of the implementation of online education, they are not necessarily ready and prepared to face the real situation when changes happen drastically. Due to this fact, they faced several

challenges in the implementation of the pedagogical approach. Online learning may seem more flexible, but it also less effective in terms of human touch, which includes consideration and body language. However, this study also raises a question related to what is the approach that used by the polytechnic and vocational sector to prepare their students in the field of employment by maintaining practical performance. This is due to the scope of study is too small to obtain solid results. based on this conclusion, other researchers should consider the recommendations of this research for further study. To better understand the results, future studies could address a different point of view and gain more diversified data and information.

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