The Effect of Online Learning on University Student's Health

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Abstract: The recent transmission from face -to face learning to fully online learning method due to the Covid-19 pandemic has created a lot of issues in the education system. One of the issues was the effect on students' physical and mental health. Although students were expected to obtain the information and knowledge shared by educators, there were many factors that have contributed to the students' health. Thus, this pilot study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by university students in studying an English course while having online learning. A total of 60 respondents from a technical university in Malaysia participated in this study. A questionnaire was distributed to the respondents via Google Form. The data were analyzed to explore the challenges faced by the respondents. Based on the analysis, it was found that many students were struggling to cope with online distance learning due to unclear instructions, unsupportive family members, part-time jobs, and did not have proper healthcare involvement such as sports or hobbies. The respondents also suggested that having counselling sessions, therapy, and taking medication could help. In addition, some of them also were hopeful of having more understanding educators to guide them properly during the testing time.

Keywords: online learning, mental health, physical health, university students

1. Introduction

Distance learning refers to the kind of education where the educators and learners need not be in the same classroom. Generally, one of the main purposes of education is for economic purposes where learners obtain knowledge and seek occupation upon completion of studies (Traxler, 2018). Apparently, due to the sudden impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the face-to-face education type which was widely practiced was abruptly substituted with the distance learning method. In many cases, online learning is also known as distance learning. This type of substitution had led to various challenges (Al-Arimi,

2014). Subsequently, distance learning had raised many issues in the education system and the teaching and learning activities in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Nonetheless, with distance learning also learners from all walks of life including those in remote were able to attend classroom lessons and lectures accordingly and benefited from the distance learning. During the pandemic, distance learning had become a well-established element of the educational platform where it would continue to expand. Schlosser and Anderson (1994) also highlighted that the distance learning system must unnaturally restore the teaching-learning interaction between the educators and learners so that proper communication takes place. However, there have always been certain challenges and shortcomings in distant learning. It had affected the pedagogical strategies of educators as well as the learning methods of the learners where everybody had to adjust to the new education style which is distance learning. This has taken a toll on the physical and mental health of educators and learners in various ways. Therefore, this study investigated how online distance learning could affect the students' health including physical and mental health, and recommended some strategies so that students could study and take care of their health sufficiently.

1.1 Research background

The World Health Organization (WHO) classified the coronavirus-related public health emergency as an international pandemic on March 11th, 2020, where most countries took various steps in preventing the spread of the virus such as contact isolation and medical system precautions (World Health Organization, 2021), including Malaysia. Subsequently, due to the decrease in population mobility, higher education institutions had to replace face-to-face classes with online learning (UNESCO, 2020). As we all know, our country is rocked by news of a virus that is attacking the whole country at the end of 2019. Therefore, we are ordered to remain indoors throughout the period of movement control order (MCO). Schools (including kindergarten, primary and secondary) and most of the institutions had to be closed to avoid crowded places. During that period, students across the country were required to go through distance learning online.

Online learning was considered as a way for educators to communicate their knowledge with students. However, there were some problems that arose when students went through online learning online (Philippe et.al, 2020). As there was some learning process that was centered on practical applications, laboratory classes, and direct contact with lecturers and other students, this transformation proved particularly difficult for university students. In this context, the previous research regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown showed that it had impacted students' academic experience and emotional condition over time (Al-Baadani & Abbas, 2020). Students' mental health has been raised because of having to move to online learning systems and attend courses under lockdown constraints, according to educational and psychological studies (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Apparently, students have noticed an increase in stress, anxiety, and sadness, as well as an intensification of negative emotions such as dread, worry, and boredom. Meanwhile, educators were found to be integrating new technological techniques with online and conventional face-to-face forms of instruction with not much understanding if those strategies could improve student learning outcomes. Nonetheless, universities were also under pressure to match their curricula with the situation due to the pandemic.

As a matter of fact, online learning gives flexibility in scheduling studies related to one's personal and professional obligations. On the other hand, it can also lead to complacency if one does not devote enough time and effort to study seriously as due to the digital nature of e-learning, poor time management can lead to failure. Time management appeared to have an impact on college students' feelings of well-being and health. Lack of time management can cause students to have a lack of sleep. Staying up late to do assignments that should have been completed days ago will reduce students' sleeping time where this can lead to exhaustion and disease. Excessive schoolwork also can lead to sleep deprivation and cause health issues among students. Other than that, the learning environment also plays a critical effect in students' achievement. Seating, light, noise, and even colour can all have

an impact on learning ability. Students that study in a good learning environment have been demonstrated to be more motivated, engaged, and capable in general. Students learning in poor circumstances, on the other hand, such as those that are uncomfortable, loud, or full of distractions, will have a much harder time absorbing knowledge and being interested. Therefore, there are many factors that could affect the students' mental and physical health which is also affected by the sudden change of learning style which is online distance learning. Thus, this study attempted to identify distance learning problems that can affect the university students' health (mentally and physically) and provide suggestions to overcome them.

2. Materials and Methods

This pilot study discussed the issues pertaining to the impact of online learning on the health of students by referring to the challenges faced by university students in studying an English course while having online learning. Both quantitative and qualitative data were needed to investigate the awareness of practicing a healthy lifestyle in relation to both physical and mental aspects to meet the research objectives. Data was collected from university students who answered the questionnaires provided. In addition, this research was also conducted to identify issues regarding distance learning and to suggest ways to improve the learning styles of distance learning by identifying problems of distance learning.

During the data-gathering phase, the respondents were given questionnaires using an online survey (Google Form). A total of 60 respondents completed questionnaires that included demographic information such as age. Open-ended questions were also included to collect more detailed data for the study. The questionnaires were based on a few issues related to the respondents' engagement in physical activities, awareness of time management, and situations while participating in online learning after MCO. The data was analyzed using Google Form outcome analysis and statistical analysis to determine the variables in terms of frequency and percentage. In addition, a semi-structured interview was also carried out to collect more data from 10 respondents. Content analysis was conducted to measure the qualitative data, which involved analyzing and classifying the meanings of words and expressions. Any data that's not relevant to the research will be eliminated from the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The collected data were analyzed accordingly and tabulated for a better understanding of the online learning challenges among the university students from two classes of first-year undergraduates. A total of 60 undergraduates participated in the study. The analysis of the questionnaire was conducted based on constructs. The age range was dominated by the university students who were the respondents (ranging from 18 to 25 years old). 20 of the respondents were between 18-19 years old. 21 of them were between 20 to 21 years old and 19 of them were between 22 to 25 years old. The responses and the percentages of responses were analyzed based on constructs.

Construct one (1) was related to respondents being clear or unclear about the lesson conducted online. 31 respondents mentioned that they were sometimes unclear, and 25 respondents highlighted that they were usually unclear about the lesson conducted online. And the rest (4) of the respondents highlighted that they were always unclear about the lesson.

Construct two (2) was about the comfort of studying at home. About 47% of respondents felt at ease studying in their own homes. Another 30% of respondents were uncomfortable studying at home. and very uncomfortable. While the rest of them (23%) responded that they do not have any problem studying at home or university.

Construct three (3) was about time management at home. About 26 respondents (43.3%) mentioned that they were able to manage their time properly during online learning. However, 25 respondents

(41.7%) confirmed that struggled to manage time during distance learning. About 9 respondents (21 %) admitted that they did not have any issues with time management.

Construct four (4) was about the number of hours spent on studies. About 18.3% of respondents shared that spent more than 10 hours per day studying. About 23.3% of respondents marked average studying hours as 4 -10 hours per day. The rest of the respondents (58.4%) shared that they spent less than 4 hours per day doing their learning activities.

Construct five (5) was about the activities that took up most of their time. A total of 28 respondents recorded the answer for hobbies. 27 respondents preferred to take naps whenever possible and 5 of the respondents recorded answer for part times jobs.

Construct six (6) was about physical activities involving sports. Most of the respondents engaged at least three times a week in physical activities (34 responses) while 16 respondents answered one to two times a week. And the rest (5 respondents) did not participate in any physical activities.

Construct seven (7) was about the understanding level of family members. 16 respondents admitted that they had a very understanding family during the distance learning period. However, there were 19 respondents who admitted that they did not have an understanding family. About 25 respondents chose a neutral response for this construct.

Construct eight (8) was about having an emotional disturbance. A total of 34 respondents reacted to having no mental health issues. However, 26 respondents shared having some mental illness.

Construct nine (9) was about engaging in activities that helped with emotional issues. Engaging with hobbies (19 respondents) and part-time jobs (19 respondents) seemed to have helped them to keep their mental health in good condition. 20 of them responded that therapy was an alternative and 2 respondents shared that taking medicine is an alternative to cure mental health.

Construct 10 was about the recommendation to manage online learning in a better way. 25 respondents suggested that counselling be offered to them to guide them through this new era. 25 respondents suggested a hybrid learning with half online classes and half physical classes and another 10 respondents suggested having more equipped educators who have more understanding of the current situation.

3.2 Discussion

Based on this research, there were a few issues that surfaces regarding online distance learning in relation to students' health. Firstly, students seemed to struggle in managing their time effectively in creating daily schedules. They need to have to-do lists to guarantee that they could keep them organized and have task reminders so that they could complete assignments before the due date and avoid pressure. The students also need to know how to handle when there is too much work to do by organizing the amount of work and due dates. The important thing is that they should not leave the work to the last minute as it will cause more stress. The students also were found not to have sufficient outdoor activities such as involvement in sports or hobbies. Many of them preferred to sleep when they have free time. Too much sleep and rest may not motivate them to study. In addition, many of them seemed to have support issues such as not having enough family support. Some of them seemed to be doing part-time jobs to support themselves financially. Thus, students need to know that they have to create a proper learning environment for them to study. This can make sure that they perform well in studies and for that, they need to take care of their mental and physical health so that they can focus on the tasks sufficiently.

3. **Conclusion and Recommendations**

According to the findings, the transition from physical learning to remote learning or online classes has had a significant impact on student's physical and mental health. Although some parties find distance learning to be a tough procedure owing to the pandemic's immediate and abrupt education system adjustments, there are also benefits to distance learning that should be enhanced in order to adapt to it in the future. As a result, there are a few options that can be used in the future to improve future research.

In conclusion, the unexpected development of COVID-19 has resulted in a major change from traditional classroom learning to online learning in a short period of time. Distant learning allows students to have additional flexibility and conduct the self-directed study without affecting their academic standing. Distance learning, which includes information technology, especially through e-learning, is considered as the present and future of education and will play an important role in future educational processes. The management of mental health is an important part of the online learning process. This is because good mental health can enable students to enjoy their time as students even if they study alone as in most of the time in the present, but the learning is still successfully implemented.

Based on the study, we may say that online education began as a good benefit, but then it also failed in certain aspects. Increased screen usage has resulted in an increase in vision problems, headaches, and strain. Students were found to be exposed to stress and anxiety due to the sudden change in the learning style (from face to face to fully online) and some family members just add on to their burden which has caused an effect on their mental and physical health of the students. However, if they can manage their way of learning well, their health also can be well taken care of. As highlighted by them in the research itself, having a counselling session, going for therapy, and taking medication could help substantially. Besides, it was also their hope to have more understanding educators and hybrid classes where they could meet the lecturers and fellow classmates occasionally to have more face-to-face interaction.

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