Research Article

Pandemic Covid-19: Challenges and Effects of Online Learning on the Counseling Students

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Abstract

This research aimed to identify the educational issues experienced by the counseling students in Malaysia. The objective of this research was to study the understanding of counselling students on the online learning. This research focused on exploring the experience, challenge and impact of online learning among counselling students during the pandemic Covid-19. The qualitative method in the form of semi-structured interviews had been conducted with five counseling students from three different universities. The findings showed that majority of the respondents experienced difficulties in the academic aspects by using online learning, eventually lead to the occurrence of emotional and psychological disturbances. The finding also found that the students are adapting in the current trends of learning in order to maintain academic achievement even though online learning is a challenging experience. The implications of this research in education field is to help and acknowledge educators to have the best approach in teaching despite the use of different medium. Lastly, the future research are recommended to study on readiness of counseling student in using technologies and the application of counseling skills via virtual session.

Keywords: Online learning, Covid-19, psychological disturbance, emotional, counseling

Introduction

In the beginning of 2020, the entire Malaysia was shocked by the outbreak of the Coronavirus and its increased infectious rate drastically, eventually brought adverse impacts on many industries. As a result, the affected individuals experienced emotional, physical and spiritual

disturbance. At the same time, individuals were forced to adapt to the new norms that had been introduced by the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH) in order to reduce the infectious rate.

According to the Ministry of Health Malaysia (2021), a total of 203,933 individuals have been infected with Covid-19 since the beginning of 2020. The reported cases are increasing drastically and continuously. At the same time, there is no positive news related to the decreased number of reported cases. This situation has been maintained for almost a year even though various efforts had been implemented by the government to prevent this situation from getting worse. However, this scenario has not only affected the economic aspect, it also created adverse impacts on current education system.

One of the initiatives had been introduced by the government was to restrict the entry of employees in education setting and students into their respective workplaces and educational institutions. From the beginning of the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO), all industries (i.e., besides essential sectors) were forced to work and study at home via various online platforms. This implementation helped to curb the spread of Covid-19 in an uncontrollable rate. However, the closure of the employment sector and educational institutions had affected many parties, which resulted into high absenteeism and absence of direct involvement due to the different constraints experienced by the individuals who were not adapted to the new working norms yet (Fatma Dewi, 2020).

Undeniably, the entire education sectors had been affected by the outbreak of Covid-19. Consequently, the students were forced to adapt to the new norm of education, which was online learning. This unexpected circumstance caused them experiencing challenges in learning starting from the end of March 2021, especially when the students have to attend important tests or examinations via online platforms. Indirectly, these challenges affected the less capable individuals in mental wellness and ability to perform daily occupational functioning.

Therefore, the research was conducted to investigate various challenges aroused as a result of the sudden changes from the physical to online learning. The research also helped to explore the respondents' perspectives on the application of online learning in the existing education system. Additionally, this research aimed to identify the challenges and impact faced by the respondents in online learning throughout the pandemic Covid-19. Finally, the respondents' ways to adapt to new norms had been explained in this research.

The changes from traditional learning method to online learning method due to the outbreak of Covid-19 caused students experiencing various challenges. The learning process at home is difficult and challenging for certain students, especially those who have financial constraints in buying advanced technological devices and sustainable usage of Internet data. Indirectly, the sudden changes have impacted their normal daily functioning and momentum on learning required knowledge in particular field.

According to Mohd Nazul (2020), online learning is a process that has been implemented before the outbreak of Covid-19 and has undergone several modifications in order to optimize the impact on the learning process. Basically, online learning is an electronic and digital

learning method that does not require a face-to-face interaction process between educators and students (Abd Kadir, 2016). Due to pandemic Covid-19, this method becomes common to all educational levels, ranging from primary to higher education. It was a drastical transformation that has been made to replace the previous education system in Malaysia in order to adjust to the current situation in which social interaction had been restricted (Ministry of Education, 2011). As a result, the students experience certain level of emotional distress with the new learning styles and norms in Malaysia.

Besides, Mohd Radzi Md Jidin (2020), the Senior Minister of Education, proposed that socio-economic factors of students and families are one of the contributing factors to the occurrence of absenteeism. This caused those individuals with financial constraints having difficulty to continue their studies due to the lack of internet access. Therefore, the government needs to implement several actions to resolve and prevent this problem from progressing to the worst scenario. Furthermore, Muhammad Izzat, et al. (2020) proposed that poor internet access can affect students' ability and motivation in learning as the students would experience constrains in accessing essential information for the purpose of self-understanding and academic assignments. The online learning would only be effective provided with fast and wide internet access (Bernama, 2020). On the other hands, lack of accessible to internet would also affect the educators to disseminate required information smoothly and effectively.

As a result, the new norm of learning would cause emotional disturbances among students and educators. According to Abdul Rashid, et al. (2020), there are various factors from internal and external aspects would induce the emotional and academic distress when implementing online learning. This implied that the emotional and mental states of students and educators would be impacted adversely if the constraints caused due to online learning still persist continuously without proper intervention (Yanping, et al., 2020). Therefore, the problem can be curbed if the causes and reasons that contribute to the problem can be resolved effectively.

Method

Design

The descriptive qualitative method had been implemented in this research. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), the qualitative research refers to the data collection based on the verbal and nonverbal information displayed by the observed respondents. Specifically, the data collection was done by implementing interview methods. Based on Merriem (1998), there are three types of interviews, namely structured, semi-structured and unstructured methods

Data Collection Tools

In this research, the semi-structured interview was conducted as this interview method possesses better flexibility and enables the researchers to explore and acquire detailed information from the respondents in a more direct way (Merriem, 1998). Overall, a total of five counseling students, who are currently pursuing their Master's level from three different universities, namely Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknikal Malaysia (UTM) had been randomly selected as the respondents. Basically, all respondents have different personal backgrounds, but similar

experience on online learning throughout the pandemic Covid-19. Their agreement to participate in this research had been collected before the process of data collection.

Research Process

Nonetheless, the face-to-face interview method was unable to be conducted as the social interaction had been restricted in order to prevent the outbreak of Covid-19. Therefore, the data were collected by using online interview via several online platforms. Prior to the interview process, the respondents had been informed with the objective, potential benefits and risks, confidentiality and autonomy to withdraw from the research. Throughout the interview process, the researcher established relationship, assessed the basic demographic information of the respondents and explore the respondents' in-depth information based on the designed questionnaires. The interviews were only recorded in the electronic devices (i.e. laptops, smartphones) after acquiring agreement from the participants. All the acquired information had been analyzed thoroughly and transcripted into the verbatim. A total of four themes had been created based on the sharing and could provide better and deeper understanding on the context of this research.

Findings

A total of five respondents whom are currently studying in counselling had been selected in this research. Basically, three of them are Malays, whereas the remaining respondents are Indian and Chinese respective. Various information were obtained as a result of the interview method implemented by the researcher. After reviewing the gathered data, all information have been analyzed and classified into four different themes and subthemes. The four main themes are (i) Counseling students' understanding on online learning, (ii) Online learning experiences and challenges, (iii) Encountered impacts and (iv) Expectations for future situations. These four themes aimed to explain students' capability to adapt in the new norms and challenges experienced throughout the pandemic Covid-19. On the other hands, the four subthemes are (i) Definition of online learning, (ii) Learning new norms, (iii) Implication on the emotional aspect, and (iv) Face-to-face learning. The Figure 1 illustrated the themes and subthemes of the findings.
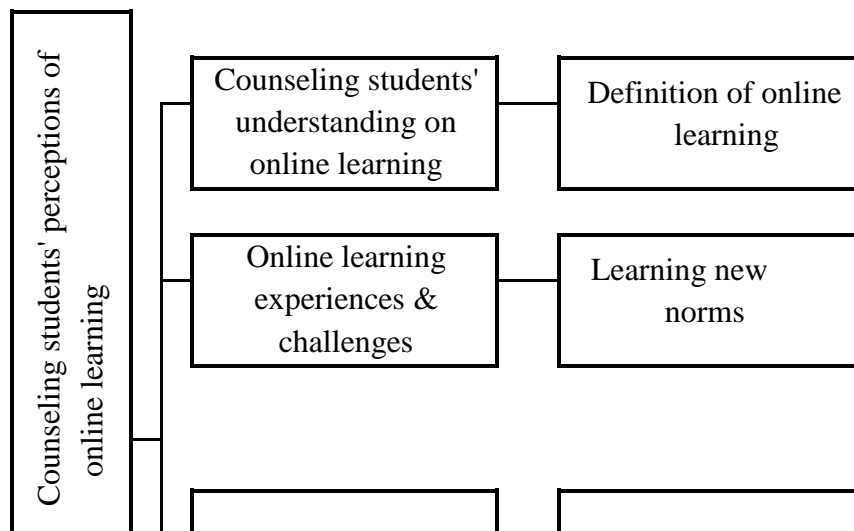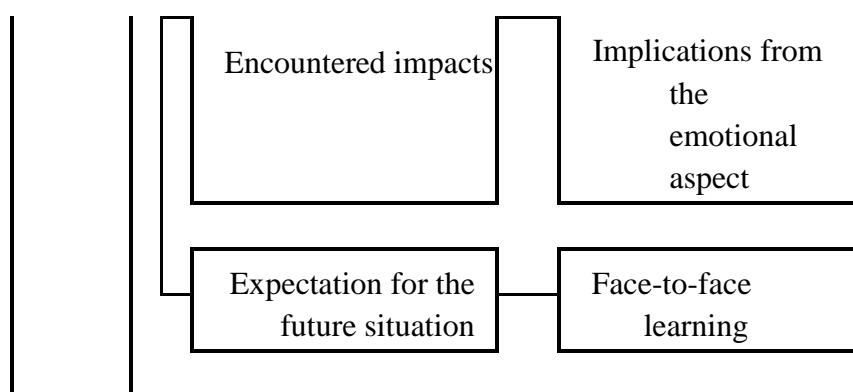
Figure 1: Summary of themes and subthemes based on the counselling student's perceptions of online learning.

Theme 1: Counseling students' understanding on online learning

The first theme focused on exploring the understanding of counseling students on the online learning, especially on their definition on online learning. The verbatim from the respondents were shown as below.

"Online learning is difficult for me because it is a new thing and involves the virtual world and not face to face as usual"

[SP1]

"Online learning class is a medium for us students to learn in the state of Covid-19 without seeing lecturer and classmate as in face to face"

[SP2]

"Based on the online, you can see that it's a new situation where we don't have to go to class, just sit in front of the laptop and listen to the lecture."

[SP3]

Based on the interview session, the respondents defined online learning as a new and uncommon learning method in which the dissemination of educational information was done without physical or face-to-face interaction between the lecturers and students. It is largely different compared to traditional method and acts the alternative that comprised of technology to adapt to the current educational systems. Besides, the respondents reported that online learning is an interactive and virtual way to acquire educational information. This reformed initiative aims to maintain the students' momentum on the necessary knowledge required by the subjects. However, this method can be only effective if possessing fast Internet access, advanced technological devices and comfortable environments in home.

Theme 2: Online learning experiences and challenges

The second theme focused on explaining the experiences and challenges faced by the respondents on the online learning. Most of the respondents reported on their difficulties and

experiences in adapting to the new norms in education. The verbatim from the respondents were shown as below.

"It's really difficult to face online classes, then with the state of the house I want to carry out my responsibilities as a child again. How do you do it, class has to go, homework still has to be done"

[SP1]

"Honestly, I kind of give up too. As a counseling student, we have to do a role play and learning skills. When I need to apply the skill, it is difficult because online face to face has a different impact. But there's no choice for me, so I have to get used to it because we didn't know how long this situation will remain."

[SP2]

"I think it's fun to take online classes because you don't have to rush to class and the lecturer also enjoys teaching. Not very stressful. It just being in front of the screen for too long make me dizzy. So far I'm still okay."

[SP3]

"First time it felt interesting because I never faced it, but then I was worried because this online PdP is challenging to listen to lectures on my laptop ... New norm for us. Seems impossible but it's happening now. There's no differences between online learning and face to face. Still get knowledge "

[SP4]

"For me, online learning, we don't meet people, we just need to have fast internet, flexible time, but at home it's very uncomfortable. It is also difficult because if the environment is not supportive, it will automatically turn me off. The internet connection is unstable. Luckily my friends are willing to assist and the lecturer is understanding, so I was kinda excited to join the online class"

[SP5]

Based on the findings, majority of the respondents were still adapting in the new norms of education and most of them experienced difficulties in being motivated to study and understanding the disseminated information, especially in practical subjects, such as counselling skills. At the same time, the respondents experienced challenges in adapting and balancing their roles as a student and members of the family at home. The absence of learning environment at home also reported as another challenges for them. However, some respondents proposed that online learning is acceptable and fun. The finding also indicated that supportive environments, understanding from surrounding people (i.e. family, lecturers, friends), interactive teaching methods, and competency in using a variety of technology are crucial in increasing their adaptability and maintaining momentum in their learning.

Theme 3: Encountered impacts

The third theme focused on identifying the encountered impacts from online learning, especially in the emotional aspects. The verbatim from the respondents were illustrated as below.

"Since this online class, my emotions have been erratic. Sometimes I feel like running away from home because I can't stand it. Stress with class…..assignment….."

[SP1]

"Thinking of quitting study because it's hard to adapt to study at home. Lately, I feel like I've kept quiet a lot and can't function properly"

[SP2]

"I can't say I'm okay all the time, sometimes I'm also stress. I think once in a while you also have to meet people. When I'm stuck at home, I can't express feelings properly. Result in negative emotions and thoughts."

[SP2]

"My parents noticed my emotional changes since I have to stay at home, having non -stop class, without time limit. Not complaining but I am also a normal human being"

[SP4]

"Since I went out that day, I'm getting okay because I can socialize with others. But now it's getting worse day by day. Especially the examination is getting near."

[SP5]

Based on the finding, four of the selected respondents experienced emotional instability due to the inability to adapt to the new norms of learning. Specifically, the respondents shared that they experience demotivation in learning, sense of loneliness and high level of stress although they have basic understanding on counselling and mental wellness. This was due to restricted social movements and lack of social support from the surrounding people, especially family members. The unsupportive environments at home also plays crucial impacts in affecting the emotional aspects of the respondents as the respondents were not allowed to socialize or going outside. These constraints caused them to experience challenges in attending or paying attention in the online learning platforms.

Theme 4: Face-to-face learning

The last theme explained the expectation of respondents on the future learning methods, such as face-to-face learning or online learning. The verbatim from the respondents were listed as below.

"I really hope the situation will be back to normal, so that I can go to class as usual and be able to meet my friends"

[SP1]

"We take lesson from this situation that has already happened and hope that I can experience face to face class just like degree."

[SP2]

"Even if Covid-19 will still exist, I hope that we can be normal like before. The ministry should figure out something for us, students."

[SP3]

"I hope this Covid is gone quickly, I want to be back (physical) class before grad because learning face to face makes you understand better."

[SP4]

"It is quite impossible for this virus to just disappear, maybe it will take a very long time. Although I hope I will be able to enter the campus again, but if that doesn't happen I hope I can adapt well and be better than before"

[SP5]

The findings indicated that all respondents were more preferred to implement face-to-face learning compared to online learning after the outbreak of Covid-19 had been controlled as the students are able to establish and acquire social supports from surrounding people in a more physical way. According to the respondents, the face-to-face learning is known as the traditional process that involves both teaching and learning between the educators and students in physical location. The findings also indicated that the educators were expected to be more innovative and should be equipped with skills in using updated informative technology if the online learning has to be implemented longer.

Discussion and Recommendations

Based on the finding, the online learning had been implemented as the new norm in the Malaysian education system. Bani Hidayat (2020) defined online learning as an interactive process that can contribute to students' productivity in learning. According to the Ministry of Education (2020), teaching and learning would be implemented via online platform until the outbreak of Covid-19 had been controlled. The government only allows students in needs, such as participating important or practical examination, requiring certain laboratories or instruments, to enter into their respective educational institutions with written agreement from the universities (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Besides that, the finding showed that all respondents became more adaptable and opened to new norms, especially being competent in using a variety of technology. Based on Mohd Nazri Md Saad (2017), a variety of new technological applications have been created to adapt to the current conditions, which can be implemented for personal use, education and management.

The development of technology for teaching and learning can help to improve the quality of education and can ease the students' adaptability and willingness to attend in the online learning process.

Undeniably, the online learning has adversely impacted the students, especially in the emotional aspects. Similar to the findings acquired by the Abdul Rashid, et al. (2020), the students who are in the process of adjustment would experience demotivation in academic and high level of stress, which can affect their ability in solving the problem and making a decision. In addition, the fear on changes would be one of the factors affecting the students' emotional stability (Pedrelli, et al., 2015) also facing with anxiety (Reta, et al., 2020). According to De Hoog, et al. (2008), fear is known as the emotional discomfort stemming from feeling threatened by a stimulus. The occurrence of sudden changes can stimulate fear, which would distort students' perspective on the encountered challenges on online learning (De Hoog, et al., 2008).

Moreover, the finding indicated that the respondents are more comfortable with face-to-face method compared to online learning. However, the preparation and modification to online learning are highly suggested due to high infectious rate of Covid-19. According to Nor Fauziana (2020), the interactive and creative learning contents should be emphasized to foster the students' interests on online learning (Nor Fauziana, 2020). At the same time, the implementation of technology was recommended to be enhanced and applied in accordance to current circumstances instead of physical lecture. Different approaches were suggested to be implemented, especially delivering skill-based knowledge that requires certain hands-on experiences.

In order to succeed in the implementation of online learning, all parties, especially educational institutions and students, are recommended to be opened and adaptable to new norms. In addition, students were recommended to be more disciplined in terms of time management. The flexible time given by the current education system could provide more space for students to manage academic tasks and spend additional time to participate in beneficial activities (Bani Hidayat, 2020).

At the same time, the results indicated that there are several benefits of implementing online learning, such as more flexible situation and accessibility to class. However, some students and educators might experience additional challenges when they did not have stable internet access and appropriate technological devices. Therefore, the government was expected to provide free and sustainable internet to the individuals in needs in order to smoothen their learning process (Nor Hidayati, 2020). The Ministry of Education Malaysia was also recommended to develop a more comprehensive guideline in implementing the online learning mechanism by accounting for the diversity of students' backgrounds.

As a result, the students have to be more adaptable in accepting the newest norms in learning process. The adaptability to the current situations can prepare and increase the readiness of an individual toward the challenges experienced in the world-of-work and drastically changed due to the fourth industrial revolution focused on technological advancements and cloud computing (Mohd Nazri Md Saad, 2017). The implications of this research in education field is to help

and acknowledge educators to have the best approach in teaching despite the use of different medium. Besides, this research can educate the learners on important of adaptive behavior during this challenging time.

In conclusion, the online learning is an appropriate alternate to replace the traditional learning method in order to prevent the continuous outbreak of Covid-19 (UNESCO, 2020). However, the students require time and supportive guidance in adapting to the current norms. There are several challenges have been encountered by the students, especially in the emotional aspects. Therefore, the government is recommended to take into consideration by providing an appropriate online learning guide and free facilities to the needed individuals, so that all individuals have equal opportunity to access for the education regardless of their personal backgrounds, especially throughout the pandemic of Covid-19.

Acknowledgements

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