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Acceptance of Distance Learning among Academicians and Students in Conventional Universities in Malaysia

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Abstract

The consequence of the outbreak of H1N1 flu in Malaysia has forced many conventional educational institutions to close down temporarily and this has impacted the continuous delivery learning process of respective institutions. As a new initiative to bring in the distance learning to our culture, this research is carried to further understand the acceptance level of this learning by using questionnaire and improved methodology from Karakoyun and Kavak (2009). The survey was sent out directly to the academicians and students from Malaysian Conventional universities, and only 53 academicians and 110 students’ respond to the questionnaire. The results found, showed that 55% of the academicians and 17% of students were experienced distance learning before. Besides that, they believe the teacher is necessary in learning and distance learning should be a supportive method, a total replacement is very challenging.

Keywords: H1N1, distance learning, conventional university.

Introduction

Planning is a crucial process in any management, no matter whether it’s for corporate sectors, governments or schools in providing a smooth on going. Even though a well planned schedules have been screened out but yet a contingency plan is always needed in the case of emergency as an alternative. But when it comes to the education sectors, it is hardly to hear and see an alternative back up plan in delivering the education contents to the students as many of our schools are still based on traditional teaching where a class room teaching is still widely used. The question will arise when there are unpredictable events taking place, especially relating to disaster and more worst related to a health issue, will we still bare or compromise by still going to schools to get an education?

Long before people had conceived of diseases affecting the general human population and the impacted on the education delivery process, our human history has been written by spread of infectious disease. The changing environment had created new opportunities for virus to cross from animal to human hosts, and then into the general population, example: Hanta Virus, Junin Virus, Malaria, Bird Flue and others.

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Subtheme : 1. Ideology and Philosophy
- Supporting Colleges/universities to serve as models of sustainable learning communities.
- Discovering how sustainable learning communities form, develop and are maintained.
In the face of such fast spread of infectious diseases challenges, our reaction probably will not continuing going to school to get education as this is proven in our lately issue of H1N1 Influenza. After the SARS and H5N1, another disaster that had taken their toll and made every one of us to be more worried is H1N1 Influenza. The Ministry of Health of Malaysia has ordered the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) campus in Lendu, to temporarily stop classes after several more students contracted Influenza A (H1N1). Estimated 5,000 students were informed by university officials that they would be given a nine-day break from classes an attempt to prevent further infections (Carvalho, 2009). In Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, lectures were postponed and students were allowed to return home for a week after a few students came down with flu-like symptoms. Although the period of closure is short, it has impacted the delivery of teaching and learning process especially in many universities and schools whereby many of these learning institutions have been closed down as way to reduce the spread of the above mentioned virus. A significant lesson had been learned from the past phenomenon where a new initiative should be developed and promoted in Malaysian Universities and Schools to ensure a continuous delivery of academic content to students.

In the context of education, an alternative plan will suit best by the distance learning. In this edge of rapid growing technology, electronics gadgets including computer, intranet and internet will allow the learners to access information from everywhere at anytime without affecting the duration of the study. Therefore, the finding of this study which is important to those Conventional Universities that is not ready for Distance Learning.

**Literature Review**

Rapid changing of global environment and widespread use of internet technology in 21st century has make distance learning become a very flexible and convenient learning method, which learners can decide what to learn, where and how to learn in respect of their request and individual differences (Karadeniz, 2009). As far as universities are concern, the university encompass both undergraduate and postgraduate students and these postgraduate students are consist of Masters and Phd students as well. Normally, these postgraduate adults are looking to build their second or third career by enhancing the degree in a respective field in order to expand their knowledge to solve the problem in their jobs, advance their career, incremental or promotion purposes.

Many researches have been carried out to measure the acceptance level of this learning. In line with that, Karakoyun and Kavak (2009) had conducted a research on the opinions of academicians regarding to the distance learning and found that the majority of the respondents were saying that the distance learning can be a supportive method rather than a replacement model for traditional learning. It was found that there are many variables that influence the level of acceptance. The following framework (Figure 1) has been constructed to understand the influential level.

**Independent Variables**

There are four Independent Variables in this research that influence and affect the acceptance of distance learning by conventional university academicians and students, which are learning effect, instructional design, management challenges and geographically isolated.
The major concern of acceptance of distance learning is whether the distance learning effect can be as effective as face to face learning effect. The student understanding of academic content and ability of students to produce maximum learning outcome without the appearance of teacher-student face to face teaching in a classroom is the most important influence factors that drive academicians and students take into consideration for the acceptance of distance learning education. As to reach a maximum effect in the Distance Learning, the lecturer’s readiness and student’s commitment plays an important role in making the learning to be more successful.

Viewing that distance learning may be a dominant delivery mode in the near future, Kim, Liu and Bonk (2005) found that distance learning MBA students viewed virtual teaming as valuable for preparing them for the increasing global business environment. As distance learning enables student to have access to information much faster and wider in a competitive global environment, Terrell (2005) found that students with a preference for information perception are more likely to succeed in online learning programs. Sun at al (2008) found that it is important to improve learner satisfaction on course flexibility, quality, perceive usefulness, perceive easy to use, in order to strengthen distance learning implementation.

In the globalization context, with the existing of internet and other modern technology, everyone can access to the latest data and information much faster, wider and easier. The performance of the new instructional design with colourful effect, sound effect, animation, live show video conferencing and etc with the assistant of the internet and other modern technologies has appeared to be much more attractive compare to the traditional hardcopies reading material and crowded classes. In 2010, Rovai and Downey found that online course design and pedagogy is one of the seven important factors that help to determine the success or failure of online programs. George and Labas (2008) argued that linking communication to learning activities offers an interesting approach to develop the efficiency of learning management systems in facilitating and increasing discussions between students.
In distance learning, a well management model that can manage and supervise the instructional design, administrative matters and delivering of the whole learning progress of students from different districts is a must. A successful distance learning method should be able to support the transformation and sharing of learning content on the internet from the teacher to all students. Besides that, distance learning method should also be able to support the communication and interaction among teacher and students and student with their peers. Yengin at al (2010) discuss the important roles of teachers how to put courses online with an effective way to engage students into the learning. In 2008, Dorrian and Wache, found that to successfully implementation of distance learning, it is very important to look into the open communication, reducing anxiety and resistance to innovation, formal and informal evaluation process and continued systems development.

As a result of growing concern over the distance learning, the programmes have been mushrooming at the colleges and universities across the nation had created administrative Challenges among the education institution. Jane and Tracy (2006), had revealed that the resistance among the administrator is mainly due to a fear of technology which turns to be one of the challenges for them. Furthermore, many researches indicated that online courses heavily involve up-front planning and more detail in designing course outline. As short, new presentation methods in delivering content and new administrative arrangement has to be made with this new technology revolution.

Faster, wider and easier access of huge amount of data and information in the Internet with no limitation of geographical isolation is the most significant benefit of this distance learning. With distance learning, student can study and interact with their teachers and peers anywhere and anytime. It requires no geographical boundaries in reaching the information and furthermore the material can be delivered to every student simultaneously even though the students are separated by distance. The technology development with its digital revolution enables the students to communicate with each other and also with their lecturers to have a quicker access to the knowledge as how face to face learning take place without attending crowded classes in the appointed date and time. Ministry of higher education of Iran uses distance learning models which is flexibility in time and place to create hundreds of virtual classes for the young people who want to obtain an academic degree (Minou, 2010).

**Moderating Variable**

All the programmes and courses needs are different. Therefore distance learning need to customize the learning effect and instructional design for each and every programme and courses, so that the need for each and every programmes and courses is fulfil.

Each course may have their own unique challenges, Smith, Passmore and Faught (2009), stress that customization and providing support and ensuring that the lecturer have sufficient time to develop effective courses, with adequate assessment for the students, it is necessary to ensure the quality of distance learning. According to Burgstahler, Corrigan and McCarter (2004), University of Washington Distance Learning program has customize their distance learning for students and instructors with disabilities teach up with DO-IT (Disability, Opportunities, Internetworking and Technology) approach.
Methodology

In Karakoyun and Kavak (2009) questionnaire, the sample only focus on academicians, however students’ acceptance of distance learning is also very important (Kim, Liu and Bonk, 2005, Terrell, 2005, Sun et al, 2008). In our study, we extend the similar set of questionnaire to students from Conventional University. Survey instruction and survey questions were presented in English. The final survey consisted of 29 items presented in 6 sections. The survey contained closed questions, in which respondents were asked to report their stand on the Learning Effect, Management Challenge, Geographical Isolated, Instructional Design, Customization and Distance Learning Acceptance. Questions in the first five sections used a five-point Likert scale with 1 referring to strongly agree and 5 strongly disagree, asking students to rank the statements according to their agreement. The last part of the survey contained one open-ended question asking for comments. Data collection is primary done through Kwik Survey (www.kwiksurveys.com), and it takes two weeks for the responses. This sampling design was cost-effective and less time-consuming than other alternatives.

The setting of the current study was carried out from 2 groups of samples. First group of sample is formed by academicians and the second group of samples is formed by students, both sample of respondents were randomly selected among Malaysian conventional university, and were completely voluntary and anonymous. Only 53 academicians and 110 students responded to this survey.

Findings

Cronbach’s alphas are computed for all multiple questionnaire items to assess the reliability of the measure, which indicates consistency of respondents’ answer to all the items in a measure. The alpha value ranges from 0.74 to 0.89. The value of Cronbach Alpha indicates the high reliability of measurement for all the independent variables.

The first group of sample is formed by 53 academicians. Approximately 62% of the participants were male and 38% female. The sample showed that 14 participants aged less than 30 years old, 17 participants aged 30 to 40 years old, 15 participants aged 40 to 50 years old and 7 participants were aged more than 50 years old. The sample of academicians includes 3 Professor, 2 Associate Professor, 3 Assistant Professor, 11 Senior Lecturer, 27 Lecturer and 7 Tutor. The sample consisted of 16% academicians having less than 1 year of teaching experience, 24% academicians having 1 to 3 years of teaching experience, 12% academicians having 3 to 5 years of teaching experience, 18% academicians having 5 to 10 years of teaching experience and 31% academicians having more than 10 years of teaching experience. Results founded 55% of academicians of the samples experienced distance learning, and 45% of academicians have no experience in distance learning.

The second group of sample is formed by 110 students. Approximately 41 participants were male and 69 female. The sample of students includes 3% of undergraduate year 1 students, 15% of undergraduate year 2 students, 81% of undergraduate year 3 and 1% of master degree students. The sample has 96% students from Business, Accounting and Finance’s background and 4% students from other background. Results founded 17% of students experienced distance learning, and 83% of them have no experience in distance learning.
If the arithmetical mean of total scores in the total data collection tool is in \((X)\); \(1.8 > X \geq 1\) the opinion of the participants regarding relevant question is taken as “totally agree”, if it is in \(1.8 > X \geq 2.6\) range refers to “agree”, “if it is \(2.6 > X \geq 3.4\) range refers to “hesitation”, if it is \(3.4 > X \geq 4.2\) refers to “disagree”, and if it is \(4.2 > X \geq 5.0\) refers to range “totally disagree”, the evaluation is done accordingly.

The distant learning questionnaire includes sub-groups, which are learning effect, management challenges, geographical isolated, instructional design, customization and distance learning acceptance as shown in Table 1.

| Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Items of Effective Learning, Management Challenges, Geographical Isolated, Instructional Design, Customization and Distance Learning Acceptance of Sub-Group of Academicians and Students |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Learning Effect (Questionnaire Items: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 & 14) | Academics* | Students* |
| X | Sd | X | Sd |
| 6.4396 | 0.9619 | 6.5454 | 0.8744 |
| 7. Lecturer and student’s understanding of academic content can be enhanced through distance learning. | 2.3396 | 0.9619 | 2.6454 | 0.8744 |
| 8. Distance learning will be a dominant delivery mode in the future. | 2.5849 | 0.9108 | 2.2181 | 0.7708 |
| 9. Distance learning enables student to have faster and wider access to information. | 2.2075 | 1.1340 | 2.4181 | 0.8921 |
| 10. Lecturer and student’s understanding of academic content can be enhanced through distance learning. | 3.3018 | 0.9876 | 3.1454 | 0.7762 |
| 11. Distance learning increases a student’s attention to the subject matter. | 3.1132 | 0.8898 | 3.0181 | 0.8983 |
| 12. Distance learning promotes a culture of service oriented approach by the lectures. | 2.8300 | 1.0314 | 2.6636 | 0.7695 |
| 13. Distance learning is interactive and that makes learning process fun. | 2.8860 | 1.0030 | 2.8454 | 1.0330 |
| 14. A lecturer’s teaching capability is enhanced through distance learning approach. | 2.9622 | 0.9739 | 2.9272 | 0.8642 |
| Management Challenges (Questionnaire Items: 15, 16, 17 & 18) | Academics* | Students* |
| X | Sd | X | Sd |
| 2.1320 | 1.0370 | 2.1090 | 0.7938 |
| 15. Copyright of information is a major issue in e-learning. | 2.1320 | 1.0370 | 2.1090 | 0.7938 |
| 16. The preparation of teaching materials is time consuming in distance learning mode. | 2.5849 | 1.0384 | 2.6636 | 0.8702 |
| 17. Class management and supervision is harder in distance learning. | 2.0754 | 1.0640 | 2.1363 | 0.9134 |
| 18. Distance learning is a long term investment strategy. | 1.9622 | 0.9776 | 2.1545 | 0.7062 |
| Geographically Isolated (Questionnaire Items: 19, 20 & 21) | Academics* | Students* |
| X | Sd | X | Sd |
| 2.2075 | 0.8077 | 2.5182 | 0.8320 |
Both the academicians and students of conventional university in Malaysia agree that distance learning enables students to have faster and wider access to information, and it will be a dominant delivery mode in the future. The students commented that distance learning method has already started in western countries, and it is a trend in Malaysia future.

However, both the academicians and students are uncertain about the items in distance learning yields better results than traditional learning, distance learning increases a student’s attention to the subject matter, distance learning promotes a culture of service-oriented approach by the lecturers, and distance learning is interactive and makes learning process fun.

Survey found 55% of academicians had experienced distance learning, they were more certain to tell from experience that lecturer and student’s understanding of academic content can be enhanced through distance learning and it can be a complement to the traditional learning method. Students were hesitation on these items because most of them have never experienced distance learning and therefore they were uncertain about the outcome.
Both academicians and students agree on the items copyright of information is a major issue in e-learning, class management and supervision is harder in distance learning, and distance learning is a long term investment strategy.

However, academicians agree that the preparation of teaching materials is time consuming in distance learning mode, but students were hesitation on this item. The academicians prepare the teaching materials, therefore they know that the preparation of teaching materials is time consuming; where else the students only receive teaching materials from the academicians and do not need to prepare teaching materials, therefore they were hesitation on the differences of the time consuming in preparing teaching materials in either traditional teaching mode or in distance learning teaching mode. Further more, if the academicians have prepared teaching materials for traditional teaching mode and needs to prepare another set of teaching materials for distance learning mode and upload the teaching materials on internet to deliver to the students, extra time and effort consuming of the academicians is certainly. Most of the academicians have experienced distance learning and do not want to spend more time and energy on preparing teaching materials for a distance learning environment.

Both academicians and students agree that distance learning integrates teaching resource efficiently and it is of utmost importance in eliminating geographical boarders.

The students agree that customized student teaching environment is easily created for both lecturers and schools through distance learning, but the academicians are hesitation on this item. The academicians were hesitation on how to create and contribute to a customized teaching environment through distance learning, but most the students have no experience in distance learning tend to be more positive thinking to accept a customized learning environment through distance learning and were willing to try out the new learning method.

Both academicians and students also agreed that distance learning increase the flexibility of forming teaching design and exchange of information among schools. Both the academicians and students agree on these items because it is easier and more flexible to form teaching design and exchange information in soft copies through internet if compare to share information in hard copies in traditional learning mode is inconvenient and involves more space and time consuming. The students found that it is good to have distance learning, especially a good learning method for working adults because distance learning enables students flexible to go online study the learning materials, to “attend” lectures and exchange information among peers anytime they want, however many times they want, when at their own free time instead of school time which is fixed.

Both the academicians and students disagree that distance learning can be implemented to all subjects and course, as some practical tutorial classes such as computer practical or biology class, it is better that lecturer explain in front of students with the existing of real materials, if distance learning apply to practical tutorial class, students may not catch up. They found that distance learning is only suitable for adults, but not for children because it needs discipline from both parties to committed and constantly upgrade on information electronically. Both the academicians and students agreed on the idea that distance learning is a supportive method for conventional learning, but were hesitation on distance learning as a total replacement model for traditional learning. The academicians believe that teacher appearance is very important and necessary, since teachers’ roles is not only to teach, but to guide and shape their students to become good and better individual, but this can not achieve in distance learning. The academicians found that face to face learning and have been used effectively throughout civilization, and distance learning is a different concept to different cultural and
application is different countries standard of living. Students were hesitation on these items because most of them have never experienced distance learning. The students consider that a combination of conventional learning and distance learning can be a temporary way of learning and were willing to experience the alternative learning environment.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, more academicians then students had experienced distance learning before. Overall, they believe that the teacher is necessary in learning and distance learning should be a supportive method, but a total replacement is very challenging.

It is notable that, people tend to accept new things, changes and challenges in their young age. This is proven where young age students tend to accept distance learning as a new learning method since it’s flexible in a sense of accessing the learning materials, and in exchanging information among peers at their convenient time. Academicians is more hesitant to have changes on the existing learning methods towards distance learning because the preparation of teaching materials in distance learning mode is more time consuming, and the academicians tend to reduce more time and effort on preparing teaching materials.

The research has some limitations on the samples. Most students who have responded are from undergraduate, only a small number of postgraduate students who had responded, therefore it’s lacking of postgraduate students’ view especially from those who are furthering the studies while working through distance learning. Most students’ background was from the similar backgrounds which are Business, Accounting and Finance, only a small number of student respondents were from other background. It is a concern that students from science background that needs lab experiments and practical training were not in the survey sample. Future studies with larger number of samples from various backgrounds of participants suggested to be carried out in order to increase the reliability of the results.

In addition, the academicians and students found that as for the practical tutorial classes such as computer practical or biology class, a lecturer based class is needed as it caters more explanation and elaboration for a better understanding. Every programmes and courses needs to be customizing with their own significant design in order to overcome this problem. For instance, process of a surgery can be recorded down and deliver to student through video conferencing without student appearance in the surgical room. As for the hospitality student, they can learn how to cook and practice cooking on their own through video conferencing without being in a hotel kitchen. However, it is another subject to be studied on and future research may find solutions for this problem.

The research found that implementation of distance learning offers new opportunities to access to educational resources without geographical distances boundaries, to share knowledge and experience among academicians and students. In the face of H1N1 and other spreading decease challenge, distance learning should be developing to the benefit of students and society. Researcher believed that education can be achieved effectively by distance learning and hope the results of this study will provide important information to decision makers of conventional universities which are not ready for developing distance learning as an alternative method in future practice.
References


