

# THE IMPACT OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SOCIAL INTERACTION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Since the emergence of Covid-19 at the end of 2019, open distance learning (ODL) has become a new norm with the university students. There are numerous issues and challenges which have arisen during the ODL period that have affected all levels of study. Thus, this preliminary research is carried out to look at the impact of ODL on social interaction among the 191 students who had answered the questionnaires. The results show that most students felt ODL had a negative impact on their social interactions throughout the remote learning experience.*

**Keywords:** *social interaction, online distance learning, ODL, Covid-19, negative impact*

## Introduction

Online teaching and learning had been introduced by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) since the year 1993. However, it had not been widely implemented by all level of studies, until recently when Covid-19 came into the world back in 2019. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the teaching and learning environment had undergone unexpected transformation. This shift from traditional to online mode of education known as ODL has now become the new normal and challenges to the lecturers (or teachers) and students.

Whether we like it or not, ODL has become part of our lives especially for those in the teaching and learning system. Various studies have been carried out since the emergence of Covid-19. One of the areas that has caused a major concern among the researchers is the impact of ODL on social interaction of university students. Some of them were by Bernadetha (2020), Cao (2020), Ilonga, Ashipala and Tomas (2020), Lasfeto (2020), Norman (2020) Mehall (2020) and Yilmazkuday (2020). The practice of social distancing as a new

norm has greatly diminished the positive impact of social interaction as individuals utilize the online environment more for learning purposes than socializing purposes (Baber, 2021). Similarly, Elmer (2020) found that interaction and co-studying networks had reduced since more students were studying alone. In addition, a study by Haider and Al-Salman (2020) found that majority of the students agreed that ODL had resulted in social distancing and students' isolation. Hence, this preliminary article is produced to look at the impact of ODL on social interaction among students in UiTM Penang specifically and some other responses from outside too where the results are being discussed as an overall view.

## Methodology

In this study, the students were given questionnaires using the Google form shared through WhatsApp and Telegram. The questionnaires contained some demographic questions and 10 general questions on social interactions during the ODL period. From the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2020 until 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021, a total of 191 respondents answered the survey. The results were run automatically by Google and are presented in this paper.

## Results and Discussions

Table 1 shows that females contributed more than half (54.5%) of the total 191 respondents. It also indicates that 68.1% respondents are below 22 years old where the number of female and male respondents is almost equal. Those between 23-30 years old contributed 26.7% whereas the remaining is 5.2% from the total respondents.

Table 1: Gender and age of respondents

| Age            | Female | Male | %    |
|----------------|--------|------|------|
| Below 22 years | 66     | 64   | 68.1 |
| 23-30 years    | 31     | 20   | 26.7 |
| 31-40 years    | 4      | 1    | 2.6  |
| 41-50 years    | 3      | 2    | 2.6  |
| Total          | 104    | 87   |      |

Apart from Table 1, this study also found that 74.5% (144) respondents are undergraduate students, and the rest are pre-diploma, postgraduates and others (not being

specified) as illustrated in Figure 1(a). Figure 1(b) shows that the 191 respondents came from almost equally distributed area which are urban (46.6%), suburban (30.4%) and rural (23%).

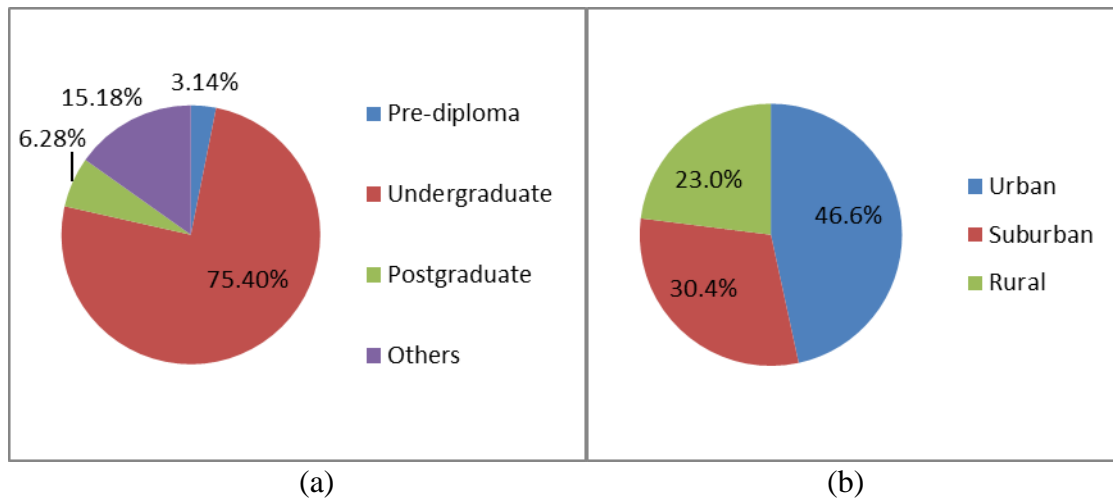


Figure 1: Study levels and residential area

This paper also includes the demographic study on the data plan, internet speed, preferable learning style and satisfaction towards ODL. Table 2 shows that only 1.6% (3) had no data plan whereas the other 98.4% (188) had either unlimited or limited data plan which were going to facilitate in ODL. Those with fast and medium speed of internet line connection constituted 87.4% (167) that is more than half of the respondents. Only 12.6% (24) had slow or no internet line at all. Half of the respondents were found to prefer blended learning (53.4%), while another 14.7% preferred total ODL. However, there were also some who chose to have a face-to-face session (31.9%). Out of 191 respondents, 58.1% (111) were satisfied with the method of learning but 9.4% (18) felt that ODL did not suit them.

Table 2: Information on internet and ODL

| Data plan      |        | Preferable learning style |        |
|----------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|
| Unlimited data | 54.40% | Face to face              | 31.90% |
| Limited data   | 44%    | ODL                       | 14.70% |
| No data        | 1.60%  | Blended learning          | 53.40% |
|                |        |                           |        |
| Internet Speed |        | Satisfaction of ODL       |        |
| Fast           | 20.90% | Excellent                 | 17.30% |
| Medium         | 66.50% | Good                      | 40.80% |
| Slow           | 12%    | Fair                      | 32.50% |
| No internet    | 0.60%  | Poor                      | 6.80%  |
|                |        | Very poor                 | 2.60%  |

The results of the impact of ODL on social interaction had been summarized in Table 3. For Item 1 until Item 7, more than 60% of the respondents agreed that their social interactions were greatly affected by the ODL session. They felt that ODL caused them to be more distance and isolated, strengthening their social personality, lead to lethargy and laziness, less involved in physical activities, create loneliness and harder for them to collaborate with others. So as for Item 9, where 69.5% said that the traditional teacher role was missing from their learning process. On the other hand, only 52.6% agreed that ODL may lead to cyber-harassment (Item 8) and about 36% agreed that ODL gave positive impact on their relationships with friends and lecturers (Item 10). For these two items, most of them had undecided feeling towards the statements. With reference to Table 3, it appears that ODL had given mostly negative impact on students.

Table 3: The impact of ODL on social interaction

| Item   | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| 1. The distance learning system resulted in social distancing.   | 0                 | 1.1      | 22.6      | 38.9  | 37.4           |
| 2. Prolonged used of digital tools causes students' isolation.   | 1.1               | 2.6      | 27.9      | 36.8  | 31.6           |
| 3. University learning contributes to strengthening the social personality of students.                    | 0                 | 2.1      | 29.5      | 43.7  | 24.7           |
| 4. Staying home for long period of time leads to lethargy and laziness.                                    | 1.6               | 4.2      | 17.4      | 30.5  | 46.3           |
| 5. Distance learning might result in a significant drop in physical activities.                            | 2.1               | 4.2      | 19.5      | 33.7  | 40.5           |
| 6. The inability to interact with other students may exacerbate feeling of loneliness.                     | 2.1               | 4.8      | 23.8      | 31.7  | 37.6           |
| 7. It is easier to collaborate face to face than on distance learning.                                     | 1.1               | 2.6      | 21.1      | 27.9  | 47.4           |
| 8. Lack of social interaction may lead to cyber-harassment.  | 4.2               | 7.9      | 35.3      | 24.2  | 28.4           |
| 9. When lecturers are not particularly visible, some aspects of the traditional teacher role were missing. | 0.5               | 2.1      | 27.9      | 33.2  | 36.3           |
| 10. The distance learning gives a positive impact on my relationship with my colleagues and lecturers.     | 5.76              | 13.09    | 43.98     | 21.99 | 14.66          |

## Conclusion

Although this is just a preliminary study on the impact of ODL to the university students in general, some actions need to be taken to reduce the negative impacts. Lack of social interaction, being isolated and feeling of loneliness may lead to depression if there are no precautionary measures taken. Furthermore, feeling lazy and lack of involvement in physical activities, especially outdoor activities, could lead to boredom and obesity. Although ODL is a new norm nowadays, students need to socialize and push themselves to participate in extra co-curricular activities to keep them connected and healthy. Parents, lecturers and teacher also need to play their role in monitoring and advising their children to lead a better and healthy lifestyle.

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