

# Embracing the new norm; challenges faced by lecturers post Covid-19: A focus group study of lecturers in Malaysia

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper examines the challenges faced by lecturers in private universities in Malaysia during corona virus disease Covid-19.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This study uses the qualitative methodology by focusing on the focus group technique

**Findings:** The results suggest that the lecturers felt the most challenged when trying to sustain the quality of online education they provide to the students.

**Research limitations/implications:** Though, the research was conducted during the tough period of the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia but social distancing was still maintained when conducting the focus group session

**Practical implications:** This research would give an insight on the detrimental effects of a pandemic on the education industry

**Originality/value:** This study is novel as it is an attempt to investigate on the conditions and challenges faced by lecturers during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic

**Keywords:** Covid-19, lecturers, new norm, Malaysia, corona virus

## **Introduction**

The year 2020 has clearly brought about an array of emotions and challenges to people all over the world. The beginning of the year started off with worry as we discovered a new virus which was threatening the livelihood of citizens of the world. It is indeed an undisputed fact that the novel corona virus Covid-19 has brought detrimental effects to the mobility of every person due to lockdowns and movement restrictions imposed by national governments (Bonaccorsi et al., 2020). Aside from fear of getting the infected by the virus, people were also afraid that they may lose their jobs and freedom of moving around. Covid-19 as it was termed became the highlight of 2020 with many industries being impacted by its wrath. One of the industries impacted, was the education industry. Academicians, teachers and students all faced a daunting fact that education institutions would be closed temporary and unconventional manners of teaching and learning would take over. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), the peak number of learners impacted by the pandemic is at a massive sum of 1,598,099,008; which represents 91.3 percent of the total enrolled learners involving 194 countries. When so many students are affected by the deadly disease, let us not forget that the academic staff and university fraternity are suffering too.

## Literature Review

### Academic staff's/ lecturers' challenges while enduring Covid-19

As of 17 July 2020, most nations have slowly lifted their lockdown restrictions to recoup their losses due to economic slowdown that emerged earlier this year (Giles & Mwai from BBC News, 2020); which forces academic staff in certain nations to return back to their seats in the offices. After a long 6 months or so working from home, is it possible to adapt to the circumstance of sitting back in the offices so effortlessly? In this section, the challenges that have to be confronted by lecturers after the lockdown restrictions are lifted are examined and explained in detail.

In terms of the relationship between lecturers and students, what happened during and after the lockdowns does not really change much as students in most countries are still being asked to study at the comfort of their homes to deter the spread of the morbid virus (Nicola et al., 2020). Perhaps, what would be the most challenging issue for lecturers during and post Covid-19 is to sustain the quality of the online education they provide to the students that it requires a considerable amount of attentiveness (Sahu, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Wong and Bandello (2020) postulated that lectures and tutorial sessions are likely to be presented virtually even after the crisis subsides as it serves as the crisis' long-term effect. The thing is, would online lectures ever top the effectiveness of face-to-face interactions? For courses that cannot be taught online, what would be the best approach to ensure that students are competent in their fields? Whatever it is, the positive outcome of e-learning relies on factors like attitudes and interacting teaching methods of faculty and the students' experience and attitudes with technology (Webster & Heckley, 1997 as cited in Iyer et al., 2020).

In addressing this, the World Bank (2020) corroborated that academic staff might face socio-emotional competence issues due to the consequence of remote teaching. Socio-emotional competence is perceived by Nordenbo et al. (2008) as the skills of teachers "in supporting, activating, and motivating students, and in developing relationships based on qualities such as respect, tolerance, and empathy". The research of Wong and Bandello (2020) noted that over time, people would literally accept working from home collectively. The claim that both of them made was that going forward, the 'society's value and impetus' to keep working from home might escalate. They reasoned that most of their staff members have their family members all under one roof. So it might be a little much more convenient to control household management at the same place as it reduces travelling and promotes greater mental peace (Shenoy et al., 2020). And this might also be a challenge to academic staff as the majority of them are already comfortable working from home. To adapt to the office environment back might take time. As according to Wong and Bandello (2020), everything from meetings, scheduling until administration could be done remotely at home. Working at home or at office, the competence as a teacher could not be forsaken as in education, teacher' proficiencies in establishing great bonds with the students are considered focal (Aspelin, 2019).

Delving deeper, Luyben et al. (2020) posited that one of the things that will remain as a challenge now and in the period ahead for students and academic staff alike is their state of mental health. Sahu (2020) and Wang et al. (2020) reiterated similar views about this by stating that the aforementioned pandemic has adversely impinged on the stress level of academic personnel and students. People are most likely to behave negatively in the terms of their emotions control too due to the movement restriction orders (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Among the emotional distresses that are enumerated in their journal are insomnia, frustration, boredom, depression, confusion and fear. And all these miseries might still pester them after the mobility restriction is ascended.

For lecturers, they might have two problems to be concerned about. Their mental health and their students' mental health. In facing and teaching students that are affected mentally during

these trying times, it might be a little bit perplexing and overwhelming. This is in line with a recent study by Odriozola-González and colleagues (2020) where at a university in Spain, students are reported to be more psychologically affected by Covid-19 compared to university staff. Thus, in coping with this occurrence, universities need to play their substantial roles in providing adequate support to mentally affected students (Zhai & Du, 2020), as well as academic staff (Odriozola-González et. al, 2020; Sahu, 2020).

Ever since the Covid-19 outbreak is announced as an international concern, the publishing of equally pivotal diseases are being neglected (Chaitoff, 2020) and clearly, most researches are disproportionately concentrated on the new renowned virus (Palayew et al., 2020). Horbach (2020) also claimed that for articles associated with the outbreak, the publication process by medical journals has expedited nearly two times faster than before. Ultimately, for non-Covid-19 studies, any actions of accelerations are not exhibited. In fact, the turnaround times for articles not related to Covid-19 are just the same to the times when it was before nCoV-19 emerged. He further argued that there are people who are still suffering from other critical illnesses aside from Covid-19 and that the research of diversified literature in the medical field must be pursued no matter what.

Still on the topic of publication, McCormick (2020) stated that the number of publications from women authors are declining at an alarming rate as people started working from home in March. This might be due to the increased burden in childcare, elder care and house chores, although it might not be the case for husbands that are working from home (Fazackerly, 2020). That said, Fazackerly (2020) reported that according to David Samuels, co-editor of Comparative Political Studies Journal, men's submissions are up nearly 50% in April. The work-from home initiative visibly does not slow men down, but rather decelerate women in research. Male authorship seemed to be outnumbering female's during the lockdown period (Amano-Patino et al., 2020; Gabster et al., 2020). It is only understandable now why women are underrepresented as being the first-authors in medical research (Andersen et al., 2020). As a result, this seems to also contribute to the challenges faced by some of the lecturers, particularly women academicians during this pandemic.

The obstacles faced by lecturers post Covid-19 are described and justified in this section. That encompasses the inconsistency in teaching quality, socio-emotional competence issues, states of mental health and decrease in publication of non-Covid-19 diseases and by women authors.

## **Method**

A qualitative method was used in this research. Qualitative designs are useful with research that intends to look deeper about a specific issue. This study wants to gather a better understanding on the challenges faced by lecturers/academicians during Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative method offers the advantage of allowing researchers to obtain in-depth comments and feedback from participants in a more proactive, and interactive manner. Consequently, qualitative research design would be the best fit to serve this purpose.

Choosing the proper sample size for a research study rests on what is to be found and why and how the findings are to be applied (Patton, 1990). In this study, participants were selected based on some common criteria like their experiences with respect to the research domain. For instance, being in the education industry and having endured the pandemic currently. Lecturers make up one of the main parts of a university's quality and knowledge contribution and their opinions and views on challenges they face during Covid-19 is fairly essential for improvement purposes. Data used in this study were collected from lecturers from a private institution.

For this study, a focus group method was used. Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data

(Kitzinger, 1995). The focus group strategy enables spontaneous information exchange, and expression of the participants' knowledge, and thoughts.

Participants participated in a focus group of five members per group. The aim of conducting the focus group is to explore some of the challenges faced by lecturers during Covid-19. Prior to the session, all participants were already experiencing some challenges in their field such as online teaching, working remotely and accessing systems online especially with the impact of the novel virus that hit the world. Lecturers were informed about the purpose and basic rules of focus group. Researchers asked for volunteers for each to be a leader of a group and gave a question guide to lead their groups. By insisting that volunteers led the groups, the effects of the researchers' bias on the eventual results of the study were reduced. Participants were asked to discuss their responses to the questions. The questions are designed as short, open-ended, and one-dimensional (i.e. what are your challenges like? Or can you give me an example?) to evoke responses from participants. The questions addressed participants' experience during Covid-19 in the area of the education industry and required them to suggest some challenges faced. The participants were then asked specifically what their specific obstacles were during this trying time with regards to their profession.

### Findings

All focus groups were transcribed and the content analyzed. The areas in the content analysis were developed based on recurring themes to represent the issues of this study. A number of recurring themes emerged from the data covering sustaining quality of online class, mental health issues, socio-emotional competence issue, and decrease in number of publication. The frequency of each theme was recorded and analyzed. Only the most frequently occurring themes were recorded and placed as described by the table below:

Table 1: Challenges faced by lecturers during Covid-19

No	Area	Challenges	Frequency
1	Inconsistency quality of online teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent interruption due to poor internet connection (8)</li> <li>• students seem to lack understanding when classes are online</li> <li>• students are late for online classes(3)</li> <li>• Complex topic can't be understood online (2)</li> <li>• require lecturers to be well-versed in online tools</li> </ul>	15
2	Socio-emotional competence issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack non verbal cue (5)</li> <li>• can't build rapport(6)</li> <li>• slower pace when getting to know students</li> <li>• lecturers are unable to assess if students understand the topic (2)</li> </ul>	14
3	Mental health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of losing job (3)</li> <li>• Uncertainty leading to anxiety</li> <li>• Depression (4)</li> <li>• Stress of working from home</li> <li>• Mood swings</li> <li>• Adjustment issues (2)</li> </ul>	12
4	Decrease in publication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tough time to focus on research (2)</li> <li>• Worried for family safety hence publication interest dropped (2)</li> <li>• Uncertain on topics to publish (2)</li> </ul>	7

## Challenges faced by lecturers during Covid-19

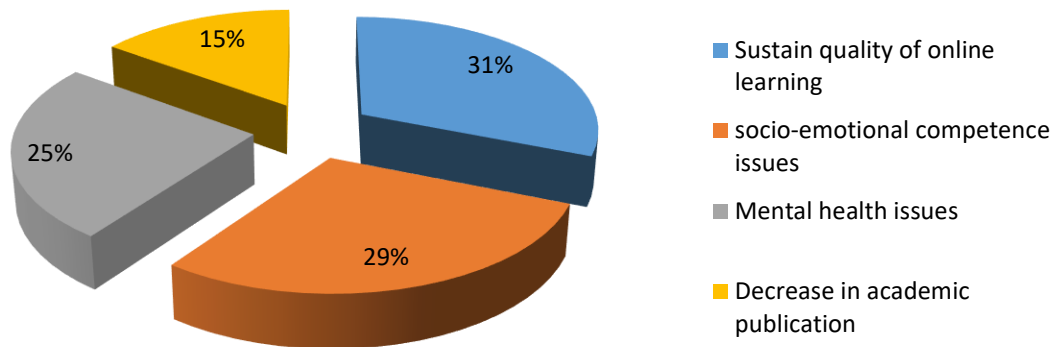


Figure 1:Percentage of challenges faced by lecturers during Covid-19

### Discussion and Conclusion

The main findings of this paper highlight the four specific challenges faced by lecturers during Covid-19. It is discovered that these challenges were considered glaring by all participants and hence emerged as the main four frequent themes mentioned. These identified themes are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

The focus group study revealed that the majority of participants with 31% considered sustaining quality of education online to be difficult in the education industry during Covid-19 in Malaysia. As lectures are conducted online, internet connection is the biggest barrier (Gohiya & Gohiya, 2020) in delivering classes in a flawless manner. The instability of Internet makes it difficult for lecturers and students to hear each other, which results to the impotence of students to follow the lessons (Radha et. al, 2020). The theme is then significantly ensued by 29 percent of the respondents feeling that conducting classes virtually influence their competence of socio-emotional states. Lecturers are incapable of building good rapports with their students like in conventional learning environment. Especially when, face-to-face interactions are scant during the e-learning process (Qureshi et. al, 2012). It is indeed challenging too to assess students' understandings on topics taught.

Subsequently, the findings also prove that the third most prevalent theme is mental health issues. Now more than ever, the mental states of lecturers and students need to be uninterrupted and stable. It is thus essential that students especially, to prepare themselves with knowledge of mental health as according to previous researches, university students often find it hard to notice that they are experiencing the signs or episodes of mental illnesses (Vanheusden et al., 2008 in Aluh et al., 2019). Literacy in mental health should be encouraged among university staff and students as a way of coping. As the final analysis, it is unobscured that the number of publications of authors that are also lecturers at universities dwindles. And among the contributing factors include uncertainty on topics to publish, inability to focus on research and are occupied about family members' health.

Figure 1 clearly depicts that most lecturers are concerned about the quality of online learning granted to the students among other three themes and are least concerned about the decrement in academic publications which can be denoted by only a small percentage of 15%.

The study was established to comprehend and gather what goes on in the education industry during this chaotic period of a pandemic is important especially when its concerning academicians in higher learning institutions. The difficulties that lecturers have to go through to mobilize themselves in a climate of uncertainty and then also deliver online classes, is unimaginable. It is crucial for lecturers and teachers alike to grab the attention of students and actively engage them in the classroom but it certainly is beyond the norm to attempt to do on an online platform. The implication is rather clear. This paper has demonstrated how the academic staff are confronted with profound challenges during the consistent process of teaching through online platforms due to Covid-19. Working remotely has been hard and performances are declining. Thus, researchers believe this study shed light on the managerial suggestions by identifying the challenges that affect lecturers' well- beings and performance. This research paper highlights the obstacles that lecturers have to endure while Covid-19 hit the world. Some of the limitations of the study include the fact that the focus groups were conducted during the Covid-19 period. Despite the fact that the focus group was done when Covid-19 cases in Malaysia was on a low, but we still maintained social distancing among participants. Future research should include a wider sample, incorporating a broader view from other field of studies or countries. Future research could also explore other areas of the education industry such as the facilities and the services provided by non-academic staffs to the students. This will enable us to find other ways to serve the stakeholders; in this case the students. In conclusion, this paper is written to examine the challenges faced by lecturers during a very stressful time in the year 2020 and the answered gathered will definitely contribute to literature.

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