

## The Challenges of Online Education during the Pandemic COVID-19: Evidence from Educators

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**Abstract:** The inception of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has distressed higher learning institutions all over the world, including Malaysia. The shutdown operation of higher learning institutions has emboldened the platform to fully online teaching and learning to ensure continuous educational measures. Educators, on the other hand, suffered several challenges in delivering quality online teaching lessons and materials for students, especially for Hotel & Tourism Management educators, since they rely heavily on face-to-face for practical classes. This study focuses on exploring educators' challenges in implementing online education. Respondents who participated in this study were sixteen (16) educators from the Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, UiTM Terengganu. An in-depth interview was conducted to explore their perspectives on online education practices. Based on the interviews, findings postulated that among the challenges encountered were communication breakdown, lack of training among lecturers with tech-savvy applications, inadequate assistance with online delivery, and assessing students' ongoing performance. Though educators must equip themselves with relevant knowledge and skills in getting ready for blended approaches, measuring the students' assessments, especially for practical classes, served as the main challenge. There is a great need for higher learning institutions to strengthen the practices in curriculum review in redesigning subjects and assessments to suit the learning needs even beyond conventional classrooms. Suggestions and tips to rethink Hotel & Tourism Management education in the post-pandemic era and for future research, were given to expand the study further.

**Keywords:** Challenges, COVID19, Educators, Online Education, Pandemic

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### Introduction

The inception of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has distressed higher education providers (HEP) all over the world, including Malaysia. The world has been shocked by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) commencing in the Hubei Province of the People's Republic of China. The virus has affected many countries worldwide. The WHO Emergency Committee declared a global health emergency in late January 2020 as COVID-19 confirmed that cases have been rising internationally (Velavan & Meyer, 2020). This pandemic has caused class suspensions and the need for an online learning mode (Moorhouse, 2020). Generally, these policies required students and lecturers to learn and work from home. It re-establish face-to-face learning in the classroom with fully online learning. The shutdown operation of higher education providers has emboldened the platform to fully operate on online teaching and learning to ensure continuous educational measures.

It will probably become a new challenge for students and lecturers to adapt to online learning (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020). From the perspective of educators, they suffered several challenges in delivering quality online teaching lessons and materials for students, either in theory or practical subjects. Online education can be

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described as the design of online learning environments comprising online learning objectives, target audience, access (virtual) type of content and tools and techniques used (Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011). The current scenario has witnessed online education as ‘all in one’ or ‘under one roof’ and ‘under the same umbrella’ terms where several online platforms, such as social media, have been associated with experiences to produce learning opportunities. Meanwhile, online learning can be defined as students’ access to learning experiences via some technology (Carliner, 2004). In this article, the term online education and online learning will be used interchangeably.

As online education takes place worldwide, the same scenario can be seen in the Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, UiTM Terengganu. The subjects offered to cover both theory and practical classes that require the majority of face-to-face elements (especially for practical classes). This article focuses on exploring educators’ challenges in implementing online education.

## Literature Review

### *Benefits of online learning*

Online learning can be seen as a powerful platform for several parties: students and educators. As it is the main alternative to brick-and-mortar classrooms, everyone should grab full advantage of the online learning platform and try adapting to the environment. Past literature has discussed online learning benefits for a decade (Atmojo et al., 2020). From the perspective of students, among the benefits that are being emphasized are that students can study anywhere at any time in a more relaxed manner, have more time for thinking and response and have increased flexibility in learning. Fageeh and Mekheimer (2013) also supported the benefit by postulating students can participate in various asynchronous and synchronous learning activities to improve language proficiency in online learning.

Moreover, the learning environment is more interesting since students can browse freely around the world. Students can create networking with students from other parts of the world. It is an open-ended session involving the interaction between students and others connected to each other. Materials and supporting notes from different universities are available online in the Open Educational Resources (OER). Through online platforms, sources/ contents of the subject can be supported by cloud computing technology and integrated with other resources. In conjunction with that, Atmojo *et al.* (2020) highlighted that students cannot commute long distances and can be location-independent. It reduced the hassle of travelling and getting prepared to go to classes. Interestingly, several authors’ research studies (Lin, Chin-Hsi, & Warschauer, 2015; Payne, 2020) indicated that motivation and students’ attitudes toward learning could be improved through online education. In a nutshell, online learning represents an untapped potential for professional learning development that may exchange traditional educational courses.

### *Challenges of online learning*

Nevertheless, though online learning has many benefits, challenges in adapting to online learning are crucial, too, for students and educators. This article will look at educators’ perspectives as they need to provide quality materials and teaching. Educators have struggled to quickly transform their face-to-face classes to solely online courses, especially without experience in online teaching (Cruickshank, 2020). Not only do educators who are new to online teaching face many challenges in implementing courses, but it is also applicable to those with less favourable views of technology (Kessler & Plakans, 2008).

As the current scenario emphasizes 100 per cent online learning, it has difficulties adapting to fully online education because of students’ readiness, technology and organizational aspect, educators’ readiness and students learning environment (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Several studies that have been conducted include implementing MOOCs by Zulkifli, Hamzah and Bashah (2020), learners’ readiness to study MOOCs (Ain & Liza, 2018), as well as technological and organizational aspects contributed to the challenges for educators (Atiaja & Proenza,

2016). However, most studies mentioned planned online learning experiences compared to the response to the crisis. At present, educators, specifically the Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, encounter challenges as this is a new norm and applied to all courses. Thus, this article seeks to bridge the gap by exploring challenges encountered by educators in online education, especially during the Pandemic COVID19. This is supported by a study from Hodges *et al.* (2020) that distinguished well-planned online learning experiences from crisis-response courses provided online. This study hopes to assist educators in delivering quality teaching processes and providing better and more conducive learning environments for students.

## Methodology

As highlighted earlier, this article focuses on exploring educators' challenges in implementing online education. Respondents who participated in this study were sixteen (16) educators from the Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, UiTM Terengganu. An in-depth interview was conducted to explore their perspectives on online education practices. This study utilized the qualitative research method where researchers interviewed sixteen (16) educators from the Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, UiTM Terengganu. The advantages of qualitative interviews are signified through respondents' interaction and allowing for unexpected topics to emerge and be taken up by researchers (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020). This can assist in counteracting researchers-centred bias, which is common in written surveys because they can only measure what is already known or expected to be of interest to the researcher (Busetto *et al.*, 2020). Convenience sampling of the respondents was adopted for this study.

Their perspectives with regard to challenges in online education were explored. Respondents were chosen based on the justification that they taught subjects that are entirely theory and subjects that have a combination of theory and practical elements, such as Front Office Management, Housekeeping, Food & Beverage Management, as well as Commercial Cookery. On top of that, they are involved in online learning activities as part of the trainer and facilitator. Respondents were approached to participate in the study. Once they agreed, a consent form was distributed to get their approval. The interview was then conducted on a one-to-one basis using conventional interviews (face-to-face with strict SOPs) and through an online platform (Google Meet). The interview that took place via online platforms was based on the justification that at the data collection scenario, some respondents are self-quarantined at home. The interview session took roughly 30 minutes per session. Both sessions were recorded and then transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Table 1 below indicates the interviewee's profile.

Table 1: Interviewees Profile

Respondent	Position	Gender	Years of online teaching	Courses online teaching
1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	Senior Lecturer	Female	>10 years	>4 courses
9,10,11,12	Senior Lecturer	Male	>10 years	>4 courses
13,14,15	Lecturer	Male	<10 years	<4 courses
16	Lecturer	Female	<10 years	<4 courses

## Findings And Discussions

Based on the interview session, findings postulated that among the challenges encountered were communication breakdown, lack of training among educators, especially regarding the latest tech-savvy applications, inadequate assistance with online delivery, and assessing students' ongoing performance. Though educators must equip themselves with relevant knowledge and skills in getting ready for blended approaches, measuring the student's assessments, especially for practical classes, served as the main challenge. There is a great need for higher education providers to strengthen the practices in curriculum review in redesigning subjects and assessments to suit the learning needs even beyond conventional classrooms. Suggestions and tips to rethink

Hotel & Tourism Management education in the post-pandemic era and for future research, were given to expand the study further. The findings are discussed below.

### ***Communication breakdown***

All respondents agreed that in online education, the lack of effective two-way communication served as part of the challenges encountered by educators. One respondent highlighted that;

“Communication is vital in ensuring students understand what we try to deliver, I feel I struggle trying to communicate with them as most of them never asked questions during theory classes, but they are unable to answer the questions related to the topic during tutorial”.

This is in line with another respondent that highlighted,

“At home, students are easily distracted. I know because I faced the same thing too. Sometimes I hear the background noises when students turn on their microphone to ask questions, and I barely hear what they say and end up with a communication breakdown!”.

Digital activities may distract students from other online content, which may inhibit their engagement in the class lesson or activity (Melor *et al.*, 2012). Another respondent postulated that,

“In online education, communication and interactions between us lecturers and the students are significant. Communication involves content matter, learning activities and assignments, but effective communication is where we are lacking. It’s probably due to poor line connections and mass lectures that students feel shy to ask”.

This is supported by Halim and Hashim (2019) that there is the possibility of having technical issues, including audio and video problems. Moreover, potential barriers to authentic communication opportunities are a limitation (Pazilah *et al.*, 2019). In addition, another respondent highlighted that,

“It’s very different to communicate online as compared to face-to-face interactions. Sometimes I feel that students cannot fully understand or grasp the concept from my explanations, and I also feel unsatisfied explaining to them compared to face-to-face”.

At the core of online education, it is vital to identify these challenges and obstacles that can be improved for the betterment of it. The value-added point has an impact on making our online learning unique and interesting compared to our competitors from other universities.

### ***Lack of training***

Findings indicated that 75 per cent of the respondents postulated that training is vital for adapting to online education. It greatly impacts online teaching as educators need to transform themselves into using fully online materials compared to conventional teaching. The majority of the respondents have more than ten years in online learning. It’s part of the culture where they practised blended learning and Week Without Wall (WWW), which emphasized online learning. Though online teaching is not at maximum capacity as compared to now, respondents possessed adequate knowledge regarding online education. Still, training appeared as part of the challenges in online education. One respondent reported that;

“I believe that we need adequate training in fully utilizing this online education. For instance, to proceed with MOOC courses, not all lecturers have the skills and knowledge to design MOOCs.”.

Moreover, one respondent highlighted,

“It requires more time and resources to make our class interesting and interactive. Though we are trying our best, we have other academic commitments too, and training would be the best answer to assist us”.

One respondent also supports this,

“Technology currently keeps on changing. We have several apps that we can use for our class. The issue here is to cope with the application and tools. We definitely need training”.

Novice educators unfamiliar with online teaching can be frustrated with e-learning and other computer-based classroom activities. Educators without any online teaching experience can lack first-hand knowledge of how communication occurs and the types of activities made possible through that communication when teaching,

which in turn contributes to the challenges for educators in online education. Additionally, another respondent highlighted,

“In online learning, we have several apps or tools that we can use for our classes. Besides conducting a face-to-face online class using Google Meet, Webex, and Microsoft Teams, we can use games like Quizizz to make the class fun. The main key here is that we need training and lack that”.

Thus, training provided by the university would equip them with the latest knowledge and skills in utilizing technology tools to produce teaching and learning aids. This is supported by Zulkifli *et al.* (2020) mentioned that without exposure to technology training like MOOC's, lecturers will lag behind in integrating traditional teaching methods with MOOCs. Hence, university support is crucial in supporting educators produce quality online learning. To summarize, Gillett-Swan (2017) reported, “The online environment also presents challenges for many academic staff who increasingly require higher levels of technical competency and proficiency on top of their regular academic workload”. Despite the challenges associated with online learning, with a rapidly expanding pandemic wreaking havoc around the world, educators and administrators will have to develop innovative solutions based on best practices to ensure that academic learning objectives and goals are met.

### ***Inadequate assistance with students' online delivery***

Interestingly, findings also discovered that inadequate assistance with students' online delivery contributed to the challenges that educators experienced. 62.5 per cent of respondents agreed that they encountered several cases where there was inadequate assistance with students' online delivery. One respondent highlighted that;

“We do have tutorial classes for accounting subjects. As much as I'm trying my best to deliver the subject to the students, I do feel like there's inadequate assistance with the student's online delivery”.

This is in line with the literature from Motzo and Proudfoot's (2017) study that identified challenges in online education related to moderating the discussion, responding to queries and task design for collaborative practices. Furthermore, another respondent stated that;

“We tried to develop an attractive online learning class and engage a lot with students, but at the end of the day, it is the student's choice. If they want to learn, they'll go for it and strive hard. Otherwise, it's vice versa”.

In addition, another respondent stated that;

“We have quite a large number of students per subject as it involves mass lectures, and it can go up to more than 60 students in a class. Thus, we are having difficulties accommodating them with assistance in online delivery”.

### ***Assessing students' ongoing performance***

Findings also discovered that another challenge for educators in online learning is assessing students' ongoing performance. One respondent stated that;

“For theory class, if you conduct a face-to-face test, you can monitor the student while they are doing the test. But in an online environment, it's difficult to monitor since the student is not in front of you. Yes, you can go for a live virtual test session, but it would consume massive data”.

In addition, another respondent stated that;

“Some of the students faced poor internet connections, so although I insist everyone turn on their camera during my lecture, it would still be unfair for those with poor internet connections. I need to consider them. So it's hard to measure whether they really understand my lecture for that day coz' I can't see their expressions”.

This is supported by another respondent that highlighted,

“I still remember one time when we have a final class presentation. The student's internet was so bad that I ended up having to share the slides on behalf of the student. The student is also missing; keep on leave and join the session. I pity them. It would be very challenging for lecturers to evaluate their performance. It goes the same with online tests and quizzes, and it's tough to tell that they are not cheating”.

The findings are in line with the literature from Arkorful and Abaidoo's (2015) study that highlights as assessments are frequently carried out online in online learning, thus with educators confined to proxy supervision

of students, making it impossible to supervise and manage to cheat (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015). In conjunction with that, another respondent stated that;

“Evaluating students’ performance would be tougher for practical classes, for example, in Housekeeping subjects. Assuming I taught bed-making that day. In a face-to-face environment, students can immediately practise what has been taught in class. They can do bed-making practices several time until they and me both satisfied. But it’s changing now. So I asked them to do videos at home; in return, I can evaluate them for that particular topic and day. But it is not the same as students come from several backgrounds”.

Interestingly, another respondent highlighted that they faced challenges in assessing students’ ongoing performance with students’ lack of knowledge or appropriate skills in online learning.

“In my class, students need to do an individual presentation. Some of them took a lot of time to set up the slides and share them with the class. So this can increase their nervousness and disturb the presentation that they are supposed to do that day. Things will get easier if they are face-to-face, with a representative to monitor or control the slides and can prepare everything in advance”.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, researchers suggest that every present and future online educators should not only emphasize online education overall but need to accentuate the extra elements; interactive videos and fun learning activities through games that will woo and ‘wow’ students, thus making the class more impactful and leading to the success of the online education course delivery. In a nutshell, online learning design will entail emotional factors that indicate why students enjoy and understand the concepts well, and it is crucial to make students feel connected and happy with the courses. Moreover, as online learning is technology-driven and heavily reliant on internet access, institutions of higher learning can partner with the telecommunication industry to subsidize internet subscription costs and provide free browsing data to students and educators to indicate their corporate social responsibilities (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

All in all, this paper adopted critical theory, where knowledge cannot be separated from the agents of the system in which it exists; the interests of various people and systems shape all knowledge. As this study highlights the challenges educators face with online teaching and learning, recommendations and suggestions would contribute to the theory. On the other hand, the study findings would benefit higher education providers to strengthen the practices in curriculum review in redesigning subjects and assessments to suit the learning needs even beyond the conventional classrooms as there are urgent needs. Suggestions and tips to rethink Hotel & Tourism Management education in the post-pandemic era and for future research were given to expand the study further.

Online learning offers an excellent opportunity for any student to explore a new area of interest. Educators with experience teaching online can be a guide for their colleagues and role models for their students. Over time, educators can develop more calls for teaching strategies that apply to teach knowledge in practice as system designers and course facilitators (Yang & Kua, 2020). Future research can expand on exploring students’ perspectives, especially on the challenges they encounter. Even limited or stunted glimpses of their perspectives can provide more profound descriptions of the online education design phenomenon (Sari *et al.*, 2020). This study can also be extended to a larger context covering large areas and populations. When the such expansion occurs, it is hoped that an enhanced understanding of online education challenges and considerations will help the next generation and educators to create more robust, enriching, and empowering online learning.

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