

## Does Class Size Affect the Teaching and Learning of English Language Course During ODL?

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### Abstract

Since the pandemic hit the world, teaching and learning have gone through many changes and reviews in order to adapt to the needs of students as well as instructors. Lecturers and students had to adhere to these changes, including larger online classrooms where one class may consist of more than the number of students in a face-to-face class. The struggles to fulfill the demand of the management, syllabus as well as students' posed challenges for the English language lecturers. The main objective of this study is to identify the views of students regarding small size classes (before mass) and large size classes (mass lecture) during their online English language learning. The method used in the study is quantitative in nature where census sampling was conducted. The respondents are 280 diploma students who enrolled Integrated Language Skills I and II (ELC121 and ELC151) courses. The study uses frequency and descriptive analysis for the data obtained from the students' questionnaire. The result indicated the students' view of different class sizes in online settings does not differ much. Proper preparation and support from many parties are the key elements to managing a big classroom. Future research can be carried out regarding the correlation of class size across gender, age and programs, and to identify the lecturers' perceptions regarding class size during their online teaching.

**Keywords:** Large Class, Small Class, Class Size, Online Language Learning, Online Distance Learning.

### Introduction

Online distance learning or e-learning in tertiary education has become a must since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020. Since its implementation, it has triggered a need to understand factors influencing how effectively students and instructors adapt to such situations. One of the concerns that has raised eyebrows for those observing would be the optimum number of students to fit in an online class. Class size has been a perennial issue in

online education and several factors are associated with the decision of expanding the online class size. Some of these factors are to ensure more cost effective courses which take into consideration of the education production versus education cost, as well as consequential implication for resource generation and allocation (Russell & Curtis, 2013), to ensure asynchronous learning networks as well as ability to serve more students (Twiggy, 2003). Administrators need to determine an optimal class size in order to balance the cost-benefit relationship, and at the same time maintain manageable faculty workloads on the lecturers while ensuring quality education is delivered (Orellana, 2006). On the other hand, university administrations are taking the initiative of expanding the market for online courses for the purposes of revenue generation and cost reduction (Taft et al., 2019). One of the ways to ensure this initiative can be achieved is when the students' enrollment is increased.

The issue of class size in higher education and its relation to the quality of teaching-learning have been studied for many years (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010; Richardson et al., 2015; Tynan et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2016). However, according to Taft et al (2019), there has been no conclusive evidence to date to support the optimum enrollment sizes for online courses. In fulfilling the demands of the universities as well as competing with other institutions, debates on online class sizes have begun to raise concerns as some worry that the effectiveness of teaching-learning could be jeopardised (Jones, 2015; Ravenna, 2012; Seethamraju, 2014; Smith et al., 2015; Snowball, 2014). This issue further looks into the fact that there is an acknowledged lack of consensus on how class size affects learning in online university courses (Gleason, 2012; Haynie, 2014; Maringe & Sing, 2014; Udermann, 2015). The issue of having a mutual agreement or consensus on the optimum online class size is likely to be the result of having too many relevant variables to capture, measure, and control consistently across settings (Taft et al., 2019). Also, it is crucial to understand that there could not be a one-size-fits-all number for an online language class size as there might be factors influencing the decision on how many can enroll in one class. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct more research in generating findings on online class sizes which is hoped to lead to more insights and suggestions of online class sizes to fit different courses demands and requirements.

### **Problem Statement**

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis, most classes are conducted online. In this case, language classes have not been without exception. Some of the benefits of online classes is that the number of participants can be much larger to the extent that they could achieve the limit of hundreds or even thousands, which could not be realised in face-to-face four-wall classes. Many students can attend and participate in online classes, either synchronous or asynchronous. However, this practice has somehow affected the increased number of students in one session for a language class, especially the ELC121 diploma-level English class. Even though the practice in the online classes has never been proven efficient, this study could not afford to either support or reject the idea without having adequate data and empirical findings in advance. Thus, this study will manage to find out how the class size may influence the nature of English language classes. The main objective of this study is to identify the views or perceptions of students regarding small size class and large size class during their English language online distance learning (ODL). These views or perceptions will consist of four elements as follows:

1. Level of satisfaction of online learning,

2. The adequacy of activities and materials for assessment,
3. Class management,
4. The preference for class size in an online language learning.

### **Literature Review**

Obviously, language class plays a major role to ensure that the teaching and learning process meets the objectives. In a physical class, many aspects should be considered, including environment, space, furniture arrangement, material, instruments, and participants. The class model needs to fulfill the nature of the subject taught as well. Some language subjects are designed with the objective to gain specific skills, for example a public speaking course needs active participation from instructors to show how it is done so that students would be able to deliver their speeches well in front of the class. Therefore, in order to ensure all students get sufficient attention from lecturers, ample time to practice as well as carry out presentations assessment within limited class time per semester, this kind of subject should be given attention on the ideal number of students. This is to ensure that all students get enough exposure to the syllabus content needed before presenting their public speech as part of the assessment.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic circumstance, the teaching and learning process is now mostly carried out through open and distance learning (ODL), which leads to fully using virtual classes. Many arguments among fellow colleagues have come to light when language instructors are required to conduct their sessions with a huge number of students based on a belief that there is no physical space needed to place these students in an online setting. Besides, it is also believed by academic administrators that one instructor is capable of handling a single session with a total number of students circa 100-150 persons. Therefore, the literature presented in this section will shade a light on past studies about class size, specifically in language classes.

Taft et al (2019) differentiated the class sizes by pointing out that large classes are appropriate for foundational and factual knowledge acquisition which require less individualised instructor-student interactions. On the other hand, small classes are appropriate for courses intending to develop higher order thinking skills, mastery of complex knowledge, and student-skill development. In a study conducted by Sorenson (2014), it was found that courses with a large class size, instructors may not be able to effectively and consistently use their expertise, knowledge, and experience on the course taught compared with teaching the same course to a smaller class size. One of the reasons that may lead to this is because with a great number of students, it takes too much time to monitor the students' performance and ensure each and every student receives the much needed attention. It is important to understand that each student may need to be addressed differently depending on how well they cope with the lesson taught. As an example, let us say the minimum amount of time for each student's essay to be checked is around 5-10 minutes. Hence, we could imagine that if there are 100 students per class session, how could it be possible for the instructor to look into the students' work and identify how best they can help the students to be more proficient later. From this scenario, it will demand more workloads, which later pose more challenges to language instructors. As supported by Cuseo (2007), the learning experience in the large class setting has been described as challenging for both instructors

and students as it has always been associated with situations that are detrimental to student learning.

Another study also highlighted the disadvantages of a large class size in terms of monitoring issues. According to Matuszak (2018), teaching in large classrooms poses unique challenges, one of which is that academic misconduct is more difficult to monitor. Examples of the misconduct that may happen are cheating, plagiarism, or even using services to complete assignments. This can result in higher levels of student dissatisfaction and anonymity in large classes has also been correlated with a higher incidence of classroom incivility, for instance, talking in class, and more frequent violations of academic integrity like cheating on formative and summative assessments (Carbone, 1999; Sorcinelli, 1994, 2002; Weimer, 1987). Therefore, the issues associated with monitoring student engagement will remain questionable and difficult to tackle wholly.

In the meantime, Babcock's and Betts' findings indicate that class-size expansion may reduce gains for low-achieving students (2009). Therefore, Dee and West (2011) have offered a hypothesis based on their findings that smaller classes promote behavioral engagement, in which teachers are allowed to control and limit disruptive behaviors and encourage attentiveness and asking questions. Besides, smaller classes may also help the teachers to promote emotional engagement in the form of student interest and personal academic identification. In addition, smaller classes may also promote cognitive engagement by allowing the teachers to assist the students in flexible problem-solving in the face of challenges. To support this, results from the Gallup Poll show that 75 percent of parents and over 80 per cent of teachers believe that reducing class size greatly improves student achievement (Folger & Breda, 1989). This conclusion seems intuitive because much fewer students would mean that there is more individual time for teachers with each student, which results in academic success. This notion has been addressed over years by Glass and Smith's meta-analysis of small class sizes, which has found that small class sizes (20 students or less) are associated with improved academic performance (1979).

Even though all findings discussed above support small class size, learning how to become undistractable is an essential and timeless skill for success in education and many other facets of life (Schmidt, 2020). Apart from that, Barr and Tagg (1995) have also propositioned that quality learning is possible regardless of class size if instructors manage to create a learner-centered environment. If it is seen from this direction, class size doesn't matter as long as there is willingness to shift from a conventional approach to the new practise. As educators, it seems that they should help students, and themselves, to learn how to use technology to effectively support learning, rather than getting distracted by it (Schmidt, 2020).

As addressed by Stage et al. (1998), shifting to a learning paradigm requires knowing how students learn and understanding barriers to student learning. Studies have clearly indicated that students learn more in active learning environments if rich, active, and diverse pedagogical approaches are employed versus passive learning techniques (e.g., Freeman et al., 2014; Hake, 1998; Light, 2001; McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith, 1987). Hence, taking into consideration how to deal with the changing environment and lifestyle to technology-based teaching and learning in this excruciating era is totally crucial. Peter Doolittle, former director

of the Center for Instructional Development and Educational Research at Virginia Tech, has expressed the reality that “we’re better off learning how to teach well in large classes, rather than trying to avoid them” (Parry, 2012).

### Research Method

The study is quantitative in nature with the approach of frequency and descriptive analysis. As an exploratory study, a survey method was applied to obtain significant feedback from the sample of the study. A questionnaire for data collection was developed based on past literature and reviewed by experts to confirm the validity and reliability of the items. Figure 1 reveals the conceptual framework of the study which explores small size classes and large size classes in learning English during ODL. Small size classes are a regular class of one group of students consisting of less than 30 students. While large size classes are composed of two or more classes combined and have a higher number of students (31 students and above).

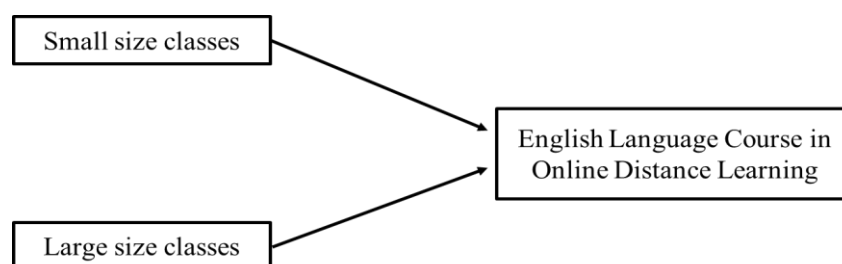


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Study

### Population

The study was conducted at the *Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu* which involved students who enrolled for ELC121 (Integrated Language Skills I) and ELC151 (Integrated Language Skills II) from three campuses. These students were involved in a short face-to-face class period (4 weeks) before the pandemic struck which later led to full online classes implementation. They have experienced online learning English courses in two settings: in small class and large class.

### Sampling

This study used census sampling because the population of the study is under control and reachable. The students were from 12 different course programs which are grouped under Social Science Programs, and Science and Technology programs.

### Instrument

The instrument used was a questionnaire which was self-developed with reference to literature review in determining the items of the questionnaire. The instrument was verified by experts in research before it was distributed to the participants through Google Form (GF) at the end of the semester.

### Analysis

Frequency and descriptive analysis were conducted by presenting the tables of the data collection and extraction. Each of the tables were described and supported by the finding of past studies.

## Results and Discussion

The study was essentially designed to identify the views / perceptions of students regarding small size classes (before mass) and large size classes (ML). The data are presented by using frequency and percentage statistics. Respondents were asked to rate their feeling of satisfaction with the following elements: online learning experience, online course materials, instructor feedback, and online homework activities. In addition to that, this study also investigates whether the online homework activities adequately prepared them for the course exams, recognizes which class size for online English class is better managed by the lecturer, and discovers their preference for class size in an online language learning.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The total number of students who answered the questionnaire was 280 students with 189 (67.50%) of them being females and the rest were males. Apparently, a majority of 269 students (96.07%) participating in this study are from Dungun campus. All students have enrolled for ELC121 and ELC151 courses. In terms of program, most of the respondents are from Social Science programs, which comprises 240 students (85.71%) and 40 students (14.29%) are from Science and Technology programs.

Table 1

### *Frequency Analysis of Demographic Profile*

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	91	32.50%
Female	189	67.50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Campus</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Dungun	269	96.07%
Bukit Besi	5	1.79%
Kuala Terengganu	6	2.14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Course Code</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
ELC121	150	53.57%
ELC151	130	46.43%
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Program</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Social Science	240	85.71%
Science and Technology	40	14.29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage for the usage of gadgets in online language learning. Students may use more than one gadget for their online learning. The device that is mostly used user laptop (92.14%). This is followed by the usage of telephone (70.36%). On the matter of internet connectivity, most of the students used mobile data

(72.14%) and WiFi (64.64%). However, none of the respondents had to go to the cybercafé to use a device in order to get connected for their online learning.

Table 2

*Gadgets and Internet Connectivity for Online Learning*

<b>Gadget</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Personal computer / laptop	258	92.14%
Handphone	197	70.36%
Tablet	4	1.43%
Using someone else's devices	8	2.86%
Cyber café	0	0.00%

<b>Connectivity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
WiFi	181	64.64%
Mobile data	202	72.14%
Sharing hotspot	96	34.29%
Cyber café	0	0.00%

## A. Level of satisfaction of online learning (Table 3)

Table 3 identifies the level of satisfaction regarding the class size for four variables namely online learning experience, materials provided, feedback received, and task given. There are significant differences between the class sizes in terms of these variables. From this table, it can be seen that most students feel that their online experience in a small class is very good (53.21%) whereas in a larger class, most of them feel that they had a fair experience (40.71%). Other than that, the differences can be seen between small class and large class where 53.21% students rated the materials provided in a small class as very good, compared to only 47.86% students feeling the same way in a large class. On the matter of feedback received, it can be seen that 55.71% students feel that they received better feedback when they are in a small class compared to only 45.36% feeling the same in a large class. Lastly, Table 3 also shows the same pattern where activities conducted in small and large classes are rated as very satisfied with the percentage of 55.71% and 50.36% respectively.

Table 3

*Level of Satisfaction Between Small Class and Large Class*

<b>Online Learning Experience</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Small Class</b>		<b>Large Class</b>	
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
My rating of satisfaction with the online English language course learning experience.	Very poor	1	0.36%	4	1.43%
	Poor	3	1.07%	21	7.50%
	Fair	70	25.00%	114	40.71%
	Very good	149	53.21%	108	38.57%
	Excellent	57	20.36%	33	11.79%
<b>Total</b>		<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Course Materials Provided</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Small Class</b>		<b>Large Class</b>	
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
The course materials provided by the lecturer are sufficient (online activities, PowerPoint slides, online references).	Very poor	1	0.36%	3	1.07%
	Poor	2	0.71%	6	2.14%
	Fair	52	18.57%	79	28.21%
	Very good	149	53.21%	134	47.86%
	Excellent	76	27.14%	58	20.71%
<b>Total</b>		<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Feedback received</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Small Class</b>		<b>Large Class</b>	
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
I am satisfied with the feedback I received from my lecturer (assessment/exercise feedback).	Very poor	1	0.36%	1	0.36%
	Poor	1	0.36%	9	3.21%
	Fair	48	17.14%	76	27.14%
	Very good	156	55.71%	141	50.36%
	Excellent	74	26.43%	53	18.93%
<b>Total</b>		<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

<b>Online Tasks &amp; Activities Given</b>	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Small Class</b>		<b>Large Class</b>	
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
I am satisfied with the online tasks and activities given during the course.	Very poor	2	0.71%	1	0.36%
	Poor	1	0.36%	9	3.21%
	Fair	60	21.43%	82	29.29%
	Very good	153	54.64%	138	49.29%
	Excellent	64	22.86%	50	17.86%
<b>Total</b>		<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

From the analysis done, it can be concluded that students are more satisfied with smaller classes in terms of the online learning experience, materials provided, feedback received, and task given. This is in line with the study conducted by Hyseni-Duraku (2014) where it was found that students from smaller and medium groups are to be more satisfied with their personal academic achievements and they also give higher evaluations to their instructors. Factors leading to these are the better cooperation and support received throughout the teaching learning process compared to students of larger groups. Blatchford



& Russell (2020) also mentioned that large classes may affect the feedback given to individual students, as well as to the nature and quality of activities planned for them. On the other hand, in a research conducted by Cheng (2011) found that increasing enrolment of students in a class brings negative and significant effects on their satisfaction in some schools like Sociology, Political Science, Computer Science and Engineering, and Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, but has no effect on others. Nevertheless, Qiu et al (2012) believe that the matter of class size should be “rationally” looked into so that other matters are given balanced attention as well. Examples of other matters that should be given the same attention would be changes in teaching strategies to ensure effective teaching-learning sessions take place to suit the ever changing demands.

B. The adequacy of activities and materials for assessment

Table 4 indicates the students’ perception on adequacy of activities and materials for assessment. In Table 4, both classes are to be considered as 'prepared me well' with small classes having a higher percentage (61.79%), whereas large classes are 51.07%. Surprisingly, 45% of the respondents in the large class perceived tasks and activities ‘prepared me adequately’ for the assessment compared to 33.93% in the small class.

Table 4  
*Assessment’s Preparation for Small Class and Large Class*

Rating	Small Class		Large Class	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Tasks and activities assigned PREPARED WELL for the	ME173	61.79%	143	51.07%
I feel that the onlineassessments tasks and activitiesTasks and assigned by theactivities assigned lecturer adequatelyPREPARED ME95 prepared me for theADEQUATELY for assessments. the assessments	ME95	33.93%	126	45.00%
Tasks and activities assigned DID NOT PREPAREME for the assessments	12	4.29%	11	3.93%
<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

The very little study was conducted to see the adequacy of activities and materials for assessments from the point of view of students in an online environment. Most literature also only looked at the effects of different class sizes in general but not focused on online English classes. Previous literature shows that there is a link between the adequacy of activities and materials with preparation for assessments from the students’ point of view in an online class. Aoumeur (2017) stated that class size affects how the assessments should be conducted. In her study, it was noted that students question the validity of the assessment as they feel that it was done unfairly in a large class. This is true as it is not an easy task to develop effective

activities and materials to cater the different characters of students in a large class. Due to this, students who cannot cope or follow lessons effectively will fall behind, affecting their assessments. Normore & Ilon (2006) also concluded that one of the reasons why small class size positively influences the teaching process is because it offers enough time for teachers to cover the whole materials assigned to them or prepared by them. This allows students to also receive ample time and attention to look at the materials provided to them. In a study conducted by Muthuprasad et al (2021), it was found that around 47 % of the respondents felt that they should be given one week of preparation before the actual submission can be done.

### C. Class Management

Table 5 shows the findings on students' perception which class is better managed. From Table 5, the result shows that students perceive a small class (51.07%) is better managed by the lecturer than a large class (4.29%). However, this finding is intriguing when 44.6% of respondents think class management is not affected by class size.

Table 5

#### *Class Management*

	Class size	Frequency	Percentage
Which online English class do you think is better managed by the lecturer?	Small class	143	51.07%
	Large class	12	4.29%
	Both are the same	125	44.64%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Most scholars find that managing large classes is daunting and leads to a huge burden. Sriwichai (2020) agreed that learning English in a large online class brings more setbacks. In a study conducted with 364 University of Phayao students, they responded that in large online classes it was difficult to get the teacher's attention when they needed assistance. When communication breakdown like this happens, the class may be uncontrollable as students are not able to fully engage in the learning process. They would have difficulty to completely comprehend the learning contents and may feel that the class is unexciting. Elison-Bowers et al (2011) warns that even small mistakes in classroom management can seriously become amplified, especially in a large online setting. Although not specific to online language classes, Anymir (2006) believes that smaller class sizes for online courses will allow more interactions to happen between the students and instructors or with their peers.

### D. The preference for class size in an online language learning

Table 6 presents the students' preference for which class size when enrolling to online language learning in the future. From Table 6, the highest score is 'I don't mind' with 50% of students which can be understood that many of them assume there is no difference between large class and small class. But this is followed by 43.57% of students prefer small classes in the future, and only 6.43% prefer large classes.

Table 6

*Class size in Future Expectation*

	<b>Class size</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
In the future, I prefer to enroll in an online English language class, which is in...	Small class	122	43.57%
	Large class	18	6.43%
	I don't mind	140	50.00%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

There is no specific research specifying on the students' preference on the size of English online class. A research conducted by Tomei & Nelson (2019) mentioned that undergraduate students enrolling in technology courses perceived that they should be between 12 to 18 students in a full online class and 17 students or a hybrid class.

From all that mentioned above, we can say that it is possible for English to be taught and improved in large classes by producing an interactive model of teaching/learning process so that interaction between teachers and students and among their classmates are put into the limelight. It is also recommended by Tomei & Nelson (2019) that English teachers should not be distracted by any unforeseen situation and carefully prepare proper plans to control the class. At the same time they expected to be able to create challenging activities, employ appropriate materials and apply the most suitable teaching methodology which may result in a great impact on English teaching and learning.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our education totally indeed and maybe perpetually. Most classes are conducted online, and English language classes are no exception. One of the perennial issues in online education is the class size. Therefore, it is essential to identify the students' perceptions regarding small size class and large size class during their online learning. The current findings show that the students are more satisfied with small class settings in the matter of online learning experience, course materials provided, feedback received, and online tasks/activities given. They believe that the online tasks/activities assigned by their lecturers in smaller classes have prepared them well for the assessments. They also think that a small size class is more likely better managed by the lecturers. In the future, however, the class size does not matter for them when enrolling in an online English class. It should be put to emphasis that instructors need to be ready to embrace any changes in the teaching instructions by identifying problems created by large classes, identifying the students' needs and employing various teaching strategies to overcome the problem. (Bahanshal, 2013). Overall, these findings were consistent with previous research that suggests that class sizes do affect students and instructors in a number of ways (Biggs, 1999; Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Ward & Jenkins, 1992).

Nevertheless, there were several limitations that could be addressed in future study. Firstly, the respondents from the Science and Technology programs were marginal. The validity of the results will be more assured if the number of respondents from both programs are approximately similar, and the analysis can be conducted more detailed. Secondly, the respondents were students from part 1 and 2. Since the online learning has been fully executed during these four semesters, perhaps, the respondents from the upper parts will contribute more conclusive data or comments.

In summary, class size, as one of seemingly popular variables in education, has its advantages and disadvantages, which poses challenges and gives impacts on everyone involved - students, educators, learning institutions, and stakeholders. While some agree that reducing a class size should be initiated and incentivised, some others perceive those insights on enlarging the size of class should be reconsidered and given credence to. These two contrasting beliefs have always formed a situation as it takes two to tango. A quest for finding the most suitable number of students in an online class is next to impossible. For the time being, perhaps the tentative recommendations can be made to cater the needs whether the class is considered better in either small or large. For future research, it is suggested to investigate the correlation of class size across gender, age and programs, and to identify the lecturers' perceptions regarding class size during their online teaching. While research has established that class size does make a difference, the question of optimal size still needs more exploration.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interest**

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