Online Learning in Cultural Studies in Post-Pandemic Era: A Case of International Students' Experience in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Faizah Mohd Fakhruddin
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Malaysia

Noor Azlan Mohd Noor
International Islamic University Malaysia Malaysia

Mastura Mahfar, Fathiyah Mohd Fakhruddin
Universiti Putra Malaysia Malaysia

Mohd Azhar Abd. Hamid, Rabeatul Husna Abdull Rahman, Noraini Rusbadrol
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Malaysia

Abstract
This article addresses several issues relating to international students' experiential learning via online learning application in cultural studies at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) during the post-pandemic era. The main objective of this study is to analyse the challenges encountered by international students in the 'Malaysian Society and Culture' course, a UTM preparatory course offered for newly registered post-graduate international students. The course was designed to expose new UTM post-graduate students, particularly international students to the uniqueness of the Malaysian multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society. This study employed a qualitative method using written semi-structured open-ended interviews in the e-learning platform. In relation to this, 15 international students who registered for the course in semester 1, 2021/2022 academic session and semester 2, 2021/2022 session were selected using purposive sampling method. Thematic analysis was employed in analysing the data. The findings of this study had shown that the challenges observed included the absence of direct experiential learning, internet accessibility, time zone difference, adjustment problem, and accessibility to online resources. The results also provided valuable insights in relation to the application of online learning in the context of cultural studies. This is pertinent as far as the educational and sociological body of knowledge is concerned.
Keywords: Online Learning, Cultural Studies, International Students, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Post-Pandemic Era

Introduction

Malaysian Society and Culture (UHAZ6123/UHMZ6023) is a course developed and designed by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) solely for its international post-graduate students. Since the international students are defined as students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are enrolled in a country other than their home country (UNESCO, n.d.), the Malaysian Society and Culture course offers a great opportunity for them to get engaged with the Malaysian socio-cultural and community life particularly living in a multi-ethnic society together with multi-religious and multi-cultural dimensions. In the meantime, the course addresses multi-faceted issues relating to culture, politics, and education. Inadvertently, the course serves as a preparatory course for the students to know Malaysia as a Muslim sovereign state of which emphasising Islam as the official religion of the state. At the same time, the course allows students to adapt and participate actively in the Malaysian community life environment through its preferred teaching and learning methods such as active learning, visits, and group projects. Those activities adopted in the syllabus will assist, facilitate, and speed up the community-engagement process for international students understanding about Malaysia.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia since March 2020, had left the Malaysian Society and Culture course to be revised particularly on teaching and learning. According to Karuppannan and Mohammed (2020), Malaysia's education system, like that of other countries, faced numerous challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides this pandemic poses the risk of death and psychological distress for people all over the world, one of the issues that students face is online learning at all levels of education (Irawan et al., 2020). In this post-pandemic era, the Malaysian Society and Culture course in addition to conventional learning, employs an online learning approach. Online learning is believed to be a complementary means of not only supporting traditional classroom learning, but also instilling the concept of lifelong learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

Statement of The Problem

Online learning has its roots in what was formerly known as distance education or remote learning (Hassan et al., 2011), in which all instructional materials are made available to students online (Ismail et al., 2020). A lot of human activity appears to have shifted online since the pandemic began (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020). The classroom-based approach has to be replaced with online learning methods. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused millions of students to be at their home-countries and unable to travel beyond borders for knowledge. Travelling to seek knowledge in Malaysia is no longer a priority or an option due to the pandemic. Instead, they have to be at their home-countries and adopted social distancing approach of learning via online to break the chain. Most students attended the course remotely from their home-countries and had to deal with various unprecedented adjustments such as time zone difference, strength of internet connection, and adaptability to new online learning tools. These challenges undoubtedly pose some impacts that affect the effectiveness of culture learning process among the international students. Therefore, it is crucial to find out the challenges encountered by international students enrolled in the 'Malaysian Society and Culture' course via online learning during the post-pandemic period, so that the online learning can be carried out effectively and efficiently.

Research Objective

The study aims to achieve the following objective

i. To analyse challenges encountered by international students in the 'Malaysian Society and Culture' course via online learning application during the post-pandemic era.

Literature Review

Studies have shown that culture learning especially among sojourners or foreigners is imperative in order to 'fit in' the host community. It is a complicated learning process that takes into account both personal challenges and situational or social factors (Masgoret & Ward, 2016). Personal factors include attitudes and motivation towards local culture, the language used on regular basis and the host community (Gardner, 2000; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003), personality (Masgoret et al., 2000; Ward et al., 2004), and individual differences i.e., a person's cultural intelligence (Early & Ang, 2003). Social factors on the other hand, include intercultural contact with the host community. Ward and Searle (1991) have indicated that increased contact with satisfaction leads to socio-cultural adaptation and minimizes socio-cultural difficulties.

In addition, indirect communication using various channels of mass communication such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the internet can also assist cultural novices to be exposed with knowledge about foreign languages, norms, values, and practical daily information at the initial phase of the adaptation process (DeFleur & Cho, 1957; Graves, 1967; Richmond, 1967). The previous cross-cultural experience abroad, length of residence (Masgoret et al., 2000), and cultural distance or the degree of similarities between foreigners' own culture and the host culture (Ward et al., 2001) are also classified as other social factors that determine foreigners' socio-cultural adaptation in the host community.

Another relevant issue that is pertinent in relation to culture learning is the current application of online learning especially during the post pandemic era. Almost all conventional face-to-face learning is replaced with online learning including cultural studies taught in higher learning institutions. Online learning is often referred to as teaching that is offered using the internet and computers (Means & Neisler, 2020). It can be classified into either synchronous or asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning allows direct interaction between instructors and students using various social media platforms. Meanwhile, asynchronous learning refers to learning that does not occur directly such as recording of lessons done in advance which can be accessed by students at any time or at a specified time (Khalil et al., 2020).

The online learning has long been introduced and is usually implemented in order to support the conventional learning or face-to-face learning (Azizan & Nasri, 2020). In Malaysia the commitment to online learning implementation has become an important ingredient in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025, namely in the 9th shift: Globalised Online Learning and the 10th shift: Transformed Higher Education Delivery (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021). Such initiatives are considered vital in education and for this, a free and open online learning course called Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) was launched in September 2015. However, a study conducted by Zulkifli et al (2020) had found that the stumbling block for the success of MOOCs is students' inability to get access to the system due to limited internet coverage. Thus, the learning process through online teaching and learning becomes critical for students. This situation is however, further aggravated by Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown enforcement strategy by the Malaysian government to curb the widespread of the pandemic.

As a result, the utilisation of social media and other alternative online teaching and learning platforms gains its momentum and deemed essential for continuous learning process. The predicament however, lies on the technological development disparity between developed and less developed countries on the issue of connectivity in relation to internet accessibility among students. The online teaching and learning platform seem to be effective in more advanced countries in comparison with students in less developed countries. The latter, faces difficulties and challenges to gain access to stable internet connection as well as securing materials for learning purposes. The challenges also involve providing relevant and appropriate learning materials through online for students subject to their levels of education (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Cheng, 2020; Sanders & Patel, 2020). In relation to the learning materials, Hoq (2020) recommended that the syllabus taught should be re-evaluated to suit the context of online learning. This recommendation is made to reduce stress among educators and students while going through the online learning process. Other challenges encountered included limited non-verbal communication because online learning does not occur face-to-face, verbal communication, time management, and limited access to learning materials and resources (Azizan & Nasri, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020). Time management challenge for instance, involves time zone differences across the globe. Students of other countries may observe time zone difference as a great challenge for learning commitment particularly in synchronous online learning. Working and family commitments could be their main obstacles for effective synchronous online learning. As a result, both educators and students would negotiate and opt for a more flexible asynchronous online learning through recorded lectures that can be uploaded and watched later by students at their own convenient of time. This is to ensure students would be able to keep themselves abreast and connected with the course registered for (Gillet-Swan, 2017; Kearns, 2012; Zhang & Kenny, 2010).

Besides that, Almaiah et al (2020) had identified four different related-dimensions in discussing online learning challenges namely, technology, individual, culture, and the course itself. Technological challenge for instance, refers to the strengths and weaknesses of internet connectivity. In other words, the focus is about the government commitments in providing and ensuring the availability of the existing internet infrastructure to the society at large, and students in particular. This involves the government policy in keeping abreast with the technological development in relation to online teaching and learning process. Individual challenge on the other hand, refers to the willingness of educators and students to utilise online learning which requires certain skills and knowledge of using it. Meanwhile, the other dimension involves cultural challenge of which the role of family or parents in offering moral and financial supports for their children effective learning process via online teaching and learning methods. Finally, the course challenge itself especially on the suitability of the course content for online interaction (Almaiah, et al., 2020).

Therefore, online learning is something that is inevitable but needs to be addressed meticulously taking into account the challenges faced by educators as well as the students. Almaiah et al (2020) had highlighted several critical factors to ensure the effectiveness of online learning. Among them are the technological facilities such as the internet, user-friendly and flexible online learning system for users, knowledge of information technology, security factor of using online learning without any concern of personal data being jeopardised, and the self-efficacy of educators and students to make full use of online learning. It is also crucial that educators must ensure on how to make the teaching and learning process interactive that are able to attract students' active participation. The students on the other hand, need

to change their learning style and the ability to do self-study (Cheng, 2020). Students must also have strong self-discipline time management skills due to the lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor or educator. This further indicates that both educators and students have to make modifications in their teaching and learning practices.

Thus, it is evident that online teaching and learning requires the role and support of various parties to succeed whether from educators, students, management, community, and government. This is especially imperative in relation to the case of cultural studies because the recipients are international students who are new to Malaysian environment. Since the Malaysian Society and Culture course offered in UTM is considered as a preparatory course and aims to prepare the students to be well adapted in the country's social and cultural environment, the cooperation and involvement of both educators and students need to be further invigorated to ensure the effective delivery of such course.

Conceptual Framework

In addressing issues surrounding culture, culture learning theory advocates the idea that someone who is new to a cultural milieu might have several issues relating to adaptation that requires learning cultural-specific and negotiation skills particularly in dealing with conflicting cross-cultural matters of the society involved (Masgoret & Ward, 2016; Bochner, 1972).
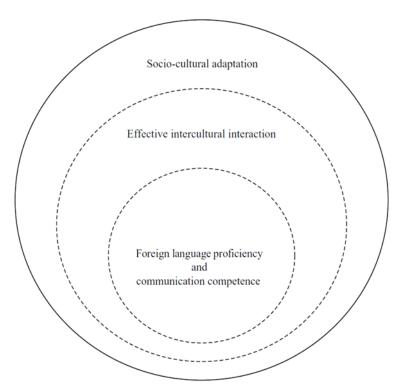

Figure 1. Interactive model of foreign-language proficiency, communication competence, effective intercultural interaction, and sociocultural adaptation (Masgoret & Ward, 2016).

Figure 1 clearly shows how the derivatives of culture learning approach takes place to achieve effective sociocultural adaptation. It is evident that the key factor for effective sociocultural adaptation in any society is language proficiency skills. The core is the language proficiency of the host community and competency in communication with the members of the host community to go hand in hand. In other words, it is pertinent to possess language

skills since such skills are the key to establish interpersonal relationships and determine the quantity and the quality of intercultural interactions. One's language proficiency allows not only intercultural interaction and experience to take place in various activities, but it enhances better sociocultural adjustment faced by the cultural novices.

Culture learning theory also emphasizes on the importance of social skills and social interaction that demand for identification of multiple facets of cross-cultural differences that range from verbal (spoken languages) and non-verbal communication (gestures, gaze, physical contact), rules, norms, and practices that may lead to intercultural misunderstandings. It minimises one's dissatisfying and confusing encounters through learning (Masgoret & Ward, 2016). In essence, culture learning theory provides the knowledge and the means for interactive aspects of life in a new cultural milieu in order to assist cultural novices for socio-cultural adaptation.

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design. Qualitative study is found to be the most suitable design because it allows researchers to explore and analyse the intended problems faced by the informants (Taylor et al., 2016). It allows the researchers to have an in-depth understanding of the various issues explored or predicaments faced by students particularly UTM international students relating to online teaching and learning process. What is significant in this study is to analyse data in relation to online learning in cultural studies by international students. In other words, to see any conflicting issues or views involved throughout the learning process by the students in understanding Malaysian culture. The issue discussed could be sociocultural, economy, politics, and lifestyles observed in a multi-ethnic society like Malaysia.

Initially, culture learning process demands for actual, face-to-face interaction between cultural novice or in this case, the international students and the local host community. However, the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak affected the implementation of conventional culture learning. International travels are restricted and the conventional face-to-face teaching and learning process could not be conducted as usual. Alternatively, international students are allowed to learn remotely through online learning from their home countries starting from academic year 2020 until now. This enables researcher to acquire detailed narratives and knowledge of informants in relation to their learning experiences and challenges on cultural studies contexts. In other words, the emic approach of the study.

In addition, this study also employed case study approach in understanding multi-faceted issues and challenges encountered in contexts by informants. Several cases were identified using purposive sampling to explore and investigate further of those cases (Perry et al., 2012). The sample taken for this study represents international students who registered for the online teaching and learning 'Malaysian Society and Culture' course from semester 1, 2021/2022 academic session until semester 2, 2021/2022 in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Fifteen informants from different backgrounds and nationalities such as Middle-East, African, Indian subcontinent, and Asian countries were selected. This total number of informants was decided and finalised based on the principle of saturation i.e., once the data collected did not bring any new themes or sub-themes to the existing data (Taylor et al., 2016).

In-depth interview using interview-schedule together with semi-structured open-ended questions was conducted to complete the narratives of cases identified. According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), characteristics of semi-structured interviews are: 1) the interviewer and participants engage in a formal interview; 2) the interviewer develops and uses an 'interview

guide'. Therefore, informants were given a set of questions that are related to the issues of online learning in the 'Malaysian Society and Culture' course. The questions were distributed to them through the application of e-learning platform that is widely used by UTM students. They were required to share their responses by submitting the soft copies either in Pdf or word document format in the same e-learning platform. All the written transcripts were then coded using Atlas.ti software. Thematic analysis was used to systematically analyse the data until themes were created to elucidate the issues of online learning in cultural studies (Bengtsson, 2016).

Results and Discussion

Based on the findings extracted from the informants' interview transcript, the results show that students faced various challenges such as absence of direct experiential learning, internet accessibility problem, time zone difference, adjustment problem, and accessibility to online resources in the application of online learning in cultural studies. The situation led to lower grasp of cultural elements among the international students.

Absence of Direct Experiential Learning

The first and the most salient challenge observed is the absence of direct experiential learning in cultural studies. Majority of informants described they were not exposed and had limited inter-cultural contact opportunity with the host community. Although informants were highly motivated and willing to mingle around and participate in intercultural interaction with the locals, nevertheless the situational factors due to Covid-19 pandemic had inadvertently affected them from such commitment. Thus, online learning was introduced as an alternative to the direct experiential learning. Unfortunately, the online learning approach to cultural studies is entirely different in comparison with the direct inter-cultural contact experience with the locals. The online learning approach could only discover extremely limited experiential learning related to Malaysian society and culture. In relation to this, Mustafa and Amira (pseudonyms) narrated to the researchers as below

> *"Prior to Covid-19 pandemic, we had a great opportunity to travel around and organised field trips. Previous batches of students had their great times visited several historical places in Malacca, museums, and had experienced enjoying local foods. The cultural studies approach then were effective and meaningful to the majority of the students registering for the course. Today, due to Covid-19 pandemic, the online learning approach in cultural studies was introduced instead. As a result, students had limited experiential learning and the learning process became less effective. They were unable to describe the reality of the inter-cultural interaction experience that took place within the locals. The online learning approach had eventually led them to poor user experience."*

In another instance, Rahman (pseudonym), a student from Pakistan said
> *"I came to know about Malaysian culture through reading materials. I never had the opportunity to mingle around with the locals and what more visiting places of my interests. It is difficult to learn one's culture from a distance and at the same time, attempting to visualising things which you had never experienced about it. I presumed my assignments could have been completed in a different way if I had the opportunity to be in contact with the locals, particularly if I had the chance to*

> *interview and to mingle around with them. The rationale for this, because I could feel and able to share my experiences about values and culture of the society. Eventually, direct and inter-cultural contact experiential learning with the locals in the society would be deemed essential in understanding one's culture. It was entirely a different kind of experience had in comparison with acquiring knowledge without experiential learning through books, watching videos, and listening lectures through online platform."*

As for Abdallah (pseudonym), an Arab student, he said

> *"The issue of not being there seemed to be a bit complicated as far as cultural studies were concerned. I was in my homeland in Saudi Arabia when I registered for the cultural study course in UTM through online learning platform. I had to admit that being away from the university campus life in Malaysia had contributed substantially to my limited understanding about Malaysian society and culture. The Covid-19 pandemic had affected my physical involvement in the field and to have inter-cultural contact with the local community in Malaysia. Otherwise, my assignment on cultural studies about Malaysian society and culture could have been done better. The rationale was, I would be able to describe my feelings, emotions, and adaptation experience via inter-cultural contacts with the local community in Malaysia. That experiential learning approach was essential in understanding society and culture."*

The foregoing narratives had shown that the direct experiential learning approach is essential in comparison with online learning in understanding society and culture. The online learning approach provides students with limited knowledge and experience that could have been derived from direct intercultural interaction process with the local community members instead. In relation to this, Masgoret and Ward (2016) described social interaction is highly important to be learned within the host community so that adaptation can be achieved. Visualising it remotely without being directly involved with the host community environment is obviously not an effective way to learn about culture. The intercultural interactions involve observation on the way the host community speaks, acts, practices their culture, norms, and values of which, is undeniably a powerful means to minimize sociocultural adaptation problems. However, since the informants were not in a conducive environment to do so, it leads to a lesser degree of effective intercultural interaction and thus, results to lower level of sociocultural adaptation which is unattainable to what that is suggested by (Ward and Searle, 1991).

Having said all these, it is evident that experiential learning approach is much more preferred in a cultural study course of any society in comparison with online learning. This is parallel with findings by (Almaiah et al., 2020; Azizan and Nasir, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020). The aim of the course initially is to provide a platform for international or foreign students to be engaged and well adapted within the Malaysian contexts. The preferred modules recommended is to provide experiential learning methods involving active participation from the students, including conducting fieldwork, field visits, community engagement, and group projects. The community engagement projects in particular, is meant to provide students with first-hand information and hands-on skills through participant-observation as well as negotiating skills via intercultural contacts with the locals. This offers them precious inter-cultural interaction with the locals particularly on the language used, playing traditional

games, eating the traditional cuisines, wearing traditional costumes, reciting *pantun* and *gurindam*, visiting historical places, and seeing traditional dance. All of these activities are purposefully designed for students to undergo a multi-dimensional encounter that could prepare them well for life ahead in Malaysia. The course is considered as an apt platform for socialization. Students are free to explore everything about Malaysian society and its culture in order to acquaint them with many jargons and new way of life during their stay in the country. This does not only aim to minimize the incidence of cultural shock, but it also offers the means to attain better sociocultural adaptation.

Internet Accessibility

Another challenge faced by online learning subscribers and considered significant in relation to cultural studies is internet accessibility. One of the important issues deliberated in relation to online learning is the infrastructure of the internet facilities. The economic and development disparities between countries across the globe have a great impact to the internet infrastructure development. Countries such as United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and several developing countries like Malaysia, would not have problems in providing internet facilities to their subscribers for online learning. Other countries like Bangladesh and Nigeria however, would have issues to deal with as far as internet accessibility and online learning are concerned. In other words, the infrastructure of the internet facilities varies across the globe. Musa (pseudonym), a Nigerian student had this to say

"It was difficult for many African countries such as Nigeria to ensure the internet facilities were in place and accessible to all. The common issue faced by Nigerians would be the power shortage. The power shortage had, in many ways, affected the online learning as far as education was concerned."

As for Lei (pseudonym), a Chinese student from China, he had this to share

"I had a common issue to face in relation to online learning at the beginning of the semester. Frequently, I could not access to the university website and the e-learning facilities. As a result, I could not view any teaching schedule and module of several courses registered for. Thus, I was unable to follow the online learning courses given by lecturers involved including their teaching materials, assignments, or any specific tasks that I am supposed to commit for the course taken. In addition, I also had difficulties to discuss further any tasks assigned to me through online."

Similar observation was made by Cheng (pseudonym), another Chinese student from China in relation to internet networking accessibility. He said

"Poor internet network had contributed immensely to his academic performance. He strongly argued that when the internet networking is poor, weak, unstable and "not smooth", he could not see, hear or interact with others in the video chat which substantially affecting his performance in the class and academic works."

As for Mehboob (pseudonym), a Bangladeshi informant-cum-student, he said:

"He lived within the central jail locality of which, internet accessibility was a major problem. According to Mehboob, the most frequent issue faced within this locality was, several jammers managed to interfere the internet signals. The signals eventually became weak, unstable, and disconnected from time to time. Such

internet interruptions had contributed significantly to the effectiveness of his online learning process."

The foregoing descriptions were in parallel with the findings observed by (Zulkifli et al., 2020; Almaiah et al., 2020). Although the world is becoming more global and advanced in technology, nevertheless it has its own limitations that could impede the progress particularly relating to internet accessibility. Online learning is undoubtedly favoured and efficiently practiced in most of the more developed countries where there is no issue of power shortage as well as the internet coverage problem. In developing countries however, where the facilities are more costly and less easy to be accessed, it creates a major hurdle for effective learning process. As a result, students often feel frustrated for not being able to follow the class and lag behind compared to their classmates. Apart from not being able to join the online class, their online communication with their group members were also distracted. This in turn, affects the whole synchronous and asynchronous online learning experience faced by the students.

Time Zone Difference

One of the complicated issues relating to online learning is time zone difference. It varies across the globe. The time zone implies the geographical world globe division and standard time used for coordination purpose. Thus, online learning is not an exceptional to the time zone predicament. Ahmed (pseudonym), an informant from Jordan said

"The time difference between Malaysia and Jordan, which is 6 hours, have a long-term impact on the lectures and the classmates' communication besides the lack of social interaction. As a student sometimes, we need to discuss the subject more with classmates and share our thoughts and understanding."

Further, Saeed (pseudonym) from Libya had similar predicament related to this issue
"Students attending for the online learning registered course were not from the same geographical region or country. Members of different countries would have different time zones. The predicament lied on the fact that students from various background and countries would have to accommodate the different time zone. The different time zone between several countries and the host could be far more than accommodative by the students. Several students might have difficulties to participate in the class session due to the time zone differences. The daytime class or lecture session could be night time event for others. Such limitations eventually led to limited desirable learning outcome and achievement of the course attended through online teaching."

In discussing the time zone difference related issues, informants revealed that the main issue in question is finding suitable and appropriate time to manage the asynchronous online learning which is parallel to the findings observed by (Azizan and Nasir, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020). This is primarily due to the location of students who registered for the course. Majority of them studied the course remotely from their home-countries. Some resided within the vicinity of the same Asian continent like Malaysia while others lived in faraway continents that have a starkly different time zone. This definitely demanded for a display of lofty skills such as bargaining, sacrifice, consideration, and empathy to reach at the most amiable point of approval. It is a fact that we are all wearing different hats in our life and trying to juggle

many responsibilities at a time. This is especially the case for most postgraduate students. These students are adult learners who are also spouses, parents, children, and employees or workers in certain institutions and organizations. The extensive time consumption for online learning might be an act of immolation for their personal time with their family or their job. Such situation could be discouraging to several students attending the online learning courses as far as time zone difference is concerned. Several informants strongly believed that empathy is imperative for teachers or lecturers to take into account in ensuring the success of the online learning process.

Adjustment Problem
Further, informants also revealed that adjustment problem is another challenge that needs to be addressed by them in relation to online learning. Aisyah (pseudonym) an informant from Pakistan and Hasan (pseudonym) from Saudi Arabia had this to say in respond to the issue

> *"Schools were closed due to Covid-19 pandemic. The government adopted various strategies to cope with the unprecedented situation due to the pandemic. At the same time, we were advised to adopt a new lifestyle and strictly observed during the lockdown period. In the meantime, educationists like teachers and others in the educational sector and administrators were struggling tirelessly to keep students on track. Alternatively, online learning in comparison to the conventional learning became a new and popular social media platform to be employed for learning. All these alternatives needed to be implemented within the shortest period of time. Informants claimed that the transition to online learning was not that easy anyway, as they wished it to be. In actual fact, the move to adopt online learning and teaching approach had created new challenges to educators and at times, could be discouraging too to both teachers and students."*

These findings are parallel to the ones found by (Almaiah et al., 2020; Cheng, 2020). Most of the informants believed that they were not ready to switch from conventional to online learning. Instead, the online learning should be gradually introduced, adapted, and adopted especially by adult students. Although Covid-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon affecting millions of people across the globe, nevertheless adjustment period to the effect through time and space needs to be dealt with appropriately and accordingly.

Accessibility to Online Resources
Issues on accessibility and online resources are intimately related and considered a great challenge for international students in understanding 'Malaysian Society and Culture' course at UTM. Online resources are considered important in ensuring the effectiveness for any online teaching and learning programmes offered or conducted. Several students of 'Malaysian Society and Culture' course highlighted concerned for their limited access to information and reading materials on cultural studies especially on the Malaysian contexts. Ibrahim (pseudonym), one of the informants from Egypt had this to say

> *"It was difficult for me to learn the subject via online especially on getting accessed of the Malaysian cultural-related information or matters. Furthermore, I was unable to go to the library due to Covid-19 pandemic, and having online teaching*

and learning away from the host community could be a great challenge for international students taking the subject. Thus, it was difficult and I had hard time to obtain additional reliable sources to enhance my knowledge in the subject taught."

Similar predicament is also observed by Muhammad (pseudonym), a student from Bangladesh. He said

"Most of the research papers sought on the Malaysian cultural studies were written in Malay. I had to admit that only few papers were written in English. This could be disadvantaged for me to complete my assignments if I was requested to do so. For me, this considered another challenge that needed to be dealt with in relation to online teaching and learning of the subject taken."

The foregoing discussions highlighted that the culture learning process requires the cultural novices to mingle well with the host community. This implies that the best learning process for any cultural studies of any given society should take place in its actual local environment where international or foreign students would have the opportunity to socialize with the locals. However, it is also useful to get themselves accustomed with information about foreign languages, norms, values, and practical daily information through the use of mass communication channels such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the internet (DeFleur & Cho, 1957; Graves, 1967; Richmond, 1967). During the post pandemic period however, the students have difficulties to access all such information. This is in line with findings observed by (Adnan and Anwar, 2020; Cheng, 2020; Sanders and Patel, 2020). Even though we are living in this globalized and modern world and many information can be accessed at our own fingertips, we cannot deny the worth of conventional methods of learning. Library used to be the most reliable and vital place to retrieve all sorts of data information. Most libraries advance and extend their service with digital service. Nevertheless, not all of the materials are digitized. Some can only be found in the form of hard copies. Thus, informants viewed that even though there is an abundance of available culture-related sources in the internet, its validity and reliability is questionable due to lack of its scientific or empirical nature in the discussion or simply because it is available in unauthoritative sites.

Another crucial problem faced by the students is the limited culture-related materials or resources that are written in English. It is quite unlikely to find the Malay culture-related materials or resources are made available in other foreign languages except its mother tongue. Thus, competency in the host community language namely, *Bahasa Melayu* is considered vital. The *Bahasa Melayu* competency and proficiency is not only a good means to open the path for better comprehension in such materials but it also leads to effective intercultural interaction with the locals. Some informants believed that the alternatives for limited Malay culture-related materials in English is to enquire about the issues they wanted to know about the locals or do some observation in the field. However, in order to do that, they have to be physically present in the actual setting of the country to experience it by themselves. Thus, our discussion circles in an unending setback loop which constantly point to the course unsuitability to be conducted online (Almaiah et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This study shows that online learning is not easy to be conducted especially in the post-pandemic era. Cultural studies preferably need a touch of face-to-face, specifically learning that involves knowledge and understanding of culture. To understand a culture, individuals need to internalize it by integrating themselves with the culture and society. This is particularly evident in the interactive model of linguistic fluency, communicative skill, intercultural competence, and sociocultural adaptation created by Masgoret and Ward (2016). If this process is skipped and replaced online, the students are unable to feel and undergo the experiential learning themselves. Thus, the challenges and barriers to online cultural learning pose an impact on students' understanding and involvement in learning it more naturally.

The dramatic and sudden transition from conventional learning to online learning poses a number of challenges. This study discloses the said challenges faced by students pursuing online learning for cultural studies course called 'Malaysian Society and Culture'. The challenges can be classified into two categories namely, extrinsic and intrinsic challenges. The absence of direct experiential learning, internet accessibility, time zone difference, and accessibility to online resources are considered as extrinsic challenges faced by the international students. These extrinsic challenges are closely related to the external, environmental, and surrounding factors. Meanwhile, adjustment problem is considered as the sole intrinsic challenge that is associated with students' personal skill and ability in the learning process. Having said all these, both types of challenges should be handled wisely by responsible parties to ensure students' learning is at optimum level. Thus, it is not only the responsibility of lecturers to be sensitized to the sociocultural needs and challenges that international students face while learning online, international students themselves must adapt to and cope with the cultural differences as well.

There is no doubt that Covid-19 pandemic has changed the global educational landscape and this transformation needs to be carried out rapidly. This scenario however, should not reach to an extent which sacrifice the value of knowledge and education. The roles of lecturers, universities, the government, and students themselves need to be intensified in order to create an effective online learning process. Further studies can be done to explore the implemented strategic plan in order to address the challenges of online learning by various parties who are directly involved in the field. The study is important as a guideline to help the process of education to be conducted effectively.

Corresponding Author

Faizah Mohd Fakhruddin
Senior Lecturer (specializing in Sociology of Family and Social Change and Development)
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Malaysia
Email: faizah.mf@utm.my

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