

Exploring the Acceptance of Online Learning by University Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) starting from China to the rest of the World has caused World Health Organization (WHO) to quickly declare it as a pandemic in March 2020. Many governments including Malaysia went into total lockdown bringing almost all aspects of life, including education to a temporary halt. Subsequently, all educational institutes had to move to teach online to restart educational activities. Lectures and students began to get connected virtually. Technological advancement made possible a quick shift from the traditional way of learning to modern online learning using various online tools. This shift required quick adaptation by lecturers and students. Before this pandemic, only a few universities used online learning as a supplementary method. Most of the universities were not prepared to move into full online learning when the pandemic hit. To provide uninterrupted education in the future, optimization of online learning is crucial. The aim of this study was to explore the acceptance of online learning by students from a private university in Ipoh, Perak in West Malaysia. The theoretical model adopted for this research was the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). It has been used to predict the use and acceptance of information communication and technology (ICT) by individuals as well as verified through different studies in technologies such as e-mail, hospital information systems under different circumstances. Some studies have used the model to examine the individual technology acceptance behaviour in different information systems. In this study, a qualitative research strategy was used with the thematic data analysis approach. The informants were students pursuing an undergraduate degree at a university. Two methods of sampling were used to gather informants, namely the purposive and convenience sampling method. There were twelve (12) students who agreed to be the informants, of which eight (8) were females and four (4) were males. Their age ranged from 20 years to 24 years old. The informants came from different areas of specialization. The information was collected through two separate focus groups discussion. Each focus group consisted of six participants. The main researcher took on the role of moderator for both groups. At the beginning of the session, the moderator asked introductory questions to engage her informants. It was followed by probing open-ended questions. The sessions were recorded and then transcribed. The data was coded and then categorized into themes. Three major themes emerged. Perceived usefulness of e-learning tools, perception of ease by using e-learning tools, and attitudes towards e-learning. The major findings of this research showed that the informants, irrespective of their areas of specialization found the online tools to be useful and they were acceptable to study through online learning. In conclusion, most of the informants were able to adapt to the technology with ease. They gradually became comfortable learning online using different online learning tools. The results from this study can be used to inform the government that they may want to consider giving incentives to universities to change to online learning platforms for courses that do not involve the use of laboratories. It is suggested here that the university ranking systems should also incorporate online learning as part of the ranking index. To provide uninterrupted education in the future, it has become evident that optimization of online learning is crucial.

Keywords: Online learning, qualitative research, convenience sampling, purposive sampling, focus groups, thematic analysis

