

## **Covid-19: The ‘New Normal’ in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract.**

*Since the early 2020, the pandemic Covid-19 has devastated effects towards the society, ecosystem and the world itself. This leads to the major interruption of education system where the academic world is forced into a virtual learning experience. Consequently, the digital way of teaching and learning has become mandatory for each level of education especially the higher education institutions in order to prevent community transmission among themselves and to protect their health and safety. Thus, it is very significant for both academicians and students to adapt to virtual teaching and learning in order to perform well and sustain in the education system. In light of this paper, the impact of the pandemic towards the education system which leads to the issue of ‘new normal’ will be analysed in conjunction with the rapidly changing education environment through the usage of technology. Moreover, it is discovered that the higher education institutions are required to obtain knowledge through virtual learning. In order to produce reliable information for this study, the analysis of quantitative and secondary data from reliable sources regarding the following issue has been conducted. The study conducted an online questionnaire to 150 samples of local higher institution students to observe the challenges occur during virtual learning. Hence, this considers as the responsibility of the relevant authorities to address this issue. Nevertheless, this pandemic has its own wisdom in which a plethora of new things has been discovered along with the new prospects of life. Ultimately, this can be confronted with the adaptation of the ‘new normal’ gradually. Hence, it is important for the society to be familiarized with the new environment alongside the expeditiously-paced technology. Therefore, it is crucial for the authorities and higher education institutions to strategize accordingly in order to sustain the quality of the education.*

**Keywords.** *Covid-19; high education; new normal; virtual learning.*

### **Introduction**

The World Health Organization (WHO) has announced COVID-19 as a world pandemic as of 11th March 2020. Hence, this epidemic can be transmitted through public exposure which leads to the disruption in education through the implementation of institution closures all around the world (Toquero, 2020). Thus, this required learning environment to be digitalized (Spoel et al., 2020) and has become mandatory for each level of education especially the higher education institutions in order to prevent community transmission among themselves and to protect their health and safety. Thus, this study aims to analyse the issue of ‘new normal’ and the impact of COVID-19 towards higher education.

Virtual learning uses internet and devices such as smartphones, computers or laptops to deliver knowledge to be attained at anytime and anyplace (Xie et al., 2020). With regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, as claimed by the International Association of Universities and UNESCO in 2020, more than 1.5 billion of higher education students’ education have been interrupted among 185 countries as a result

of universities closure. Through the analysis of Dumford & Miller in 2018, it indicated that virtual learning has resulted to insufficient engagement between the academicians and students as physical learning provide better communications. Hence, some might experience effective in virtual learning, nevertheless provide limitation to others (Dumford et al., 2018)

## **Method**

The aim of this study is to analyse the issue of ‘new normal’ in higher education and to discover the impact of COVID-19 in higher education which leads to the virtual learning among the academicians and lecturers. This research used both qualitative and quantitative data collection method in order to achieve the purpose of the study.

In order to obtain a better understanding on the issue of ‘new normal’ and its impact towards higher education, qualitative data was accumulated through literature review of accredited journals, associated documents and authoritative websites which are related to this research. Apart from that, quantitative data was gathered through closed-ended questionnaire using Google Form which were delegated to 150 local undergraduates from the higher education to analyse the challenges confronted during virtual learning.

In addition, the first section of the questionnaire is created to accumulate the socio-demographic information about the respondents such as their age and gender whereas the other part of the questionnaire is regarding the respondents’ opinion and challenges in conducting virtual learning. The data was evaluated using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies table which illustrates the percentage of each variable. This method of data analysis is preferred as it can be easily summarised to present accurate and variable survey data.

## **Discussion**

According to the literature analysis and data collection, virtual learning has its benefits and drawbacks and based on the analysis, it is expected for both academicians and students to adapt to a new learning ecosystem in order to fulfil the requirements of the education during this pandemic. Moreover, the issue of ‘new normal’ in higher education in Brunei Darussalam indicates that challenges arise during virtual learning and hence it is the responsibility of the relevant authorities to tackle this issue. Nevertheless, the development of the technology and its contribution to the education during this pandemic is considered as opportunity for an ultimate learning. The findings are discussed in the sections below.

### **The ‘New Normal’ In Higher Education**

The adaptation of the digital learning in higher education has obligated the academicians and students to be adapted to a ‘new normal’ environment upon educating and learning hence, the ‘new normal’ will be significant even in the post COVID-19 pandemic (Xie, Siau, & Nah, 2020). In discussing the ‘new normal’ in higher education, flexible learning prospects can be obtained (Xie et al., 2020).

Subsequently, it is expected that the drawbacks of virtual learning such as digital fatigue will be present currently and, in the future (Aras Bozkurt, 2020). As stated by Erten and Özdemir in 2020, “stress, fatigue, desensitization toward the environment, loss of interest, and physical and mental problems” are considered as the symptoms of digital fatigue. Nevertheless, digital fatigue can be prevented by utilizing the superlative practices of virtual learning as it has related to the technology tools or places used during virtual learning (Aras Bozkurt, 2020). Research has been conducted globally on the matter of COVID-19 epidemic crisis predominantly towards the effects on mind, economy, society and ecosystem (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

### The Challenges Of Virtual Learning

The previous section has discussed regarding the ‘new normal’ of COVID-19 hence, this leads to the challenges that the local higher education students confronted whilst virtual learning. According to the responses from the respondents via the Google Form in table 1 below, more than half of the respondents are between the ages of 22-25 years old with 58 percent, followed by under 22 years old with 30 percent. Moreover, only 12 percent of the respondents were above the age of 25.

	FREQ	PERCENT	VALID PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
<b>Valid</b>	-	-	-	-
Under 22 Years Old	45	30	30	-
Between 22-25 Years Old	87	58	58	30
Above 25 Years Old	18	12	12	88
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100</b>

Based on the table 2 below, more than half of the respondents with 56.7 percent indicates that it is less convenient to study through virtual learning which leads to the challenges that they encountered in the table 3 below. Meanwhile, less than half of the respondents with 43.3 percent have stated that virtual learning is convenient for the students among the local higher institution. Essentially, this issue needs to be addressed as it is obligatory to conduct virtual learning as part of the ‘new normal’ in the education.

	FREQUENCY	PERCENT	VALID PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
Valid				
Convenient	75	43.3	43.3	43.3
Less Convenient	85	56.7	56.7	100
<b>TOTAL</b>				

According to the table 3 above, majority of the local undergraduates encountered internet problem with 30.7 percent followed by limited concentrations

of 26 percent which might cause by distractions at home with 23.3 percent during virtual learning. Meanwhile, 20 percent stated that they experience less conducive environment for virtual learning.

Thus, to address this issue, relevant authorities should improve the local internet services to experience better connection with others especially in virtual learning. As stated in one of the local newspapers in Brunei Darussalam, Borneo Bulletin has stated that a major upsurge of the internet data usage has brought the system to a limitation. As a result, the authorized parties are aiming their best to address this issue by resolving it with enforcement agencies to increase the capacity of the internet system (Mahmud, 2021).

	<b>FREQ</b>	<b>PERCENT</b>	<b>VALID PERCENT</b>	<b>CUMULATIVE PERCENT</b>
Valid				
Internet Problem	46	30.7	30.7	30.7
Inconducive environment	30	20	20	50.7
Distractions at home	35	23.3	23.3	74
Limited concentrations	39	26	26	100

### **Digitalized Education Environment**

The evolution and advancement of information technology provide a technical platform for education reform and the opportunities for innovation in education. In order to be sustainable in education, various higher education institutions have implemented digital education for the adaptation of the students in terms of school schedules virtually. Nevertheless, this pandemic has its own wisdom in which a plethora of new things has been discovered along with the new prospects of life.

According to the analysis from Xie, Siau and Nah in 2020, virtual learning has its own advantages and wisdoms which comprise:

1. Flexibility and efficiency  
The absence of space and time offer students and the academicians to pursue virtual education without hassle and provide existent interaction amidst of COVID-19 epidemic. Furthermore, information technology is created and developed affordably to ease the difficulty in virtual learning among the higher education institution.
2. Easy access of knowledge  
In regards with the accessibility of knowledge, digital materials such as “e-books, e-documents and e-data” are widely available online with reasonable price and various information can be retrieved online for education.
3. Equity  
In discussing the equity of the education, virtual learning provides equal opportunity towards everyone especially students from the rural areas and developing countries. In addition, it does not prevent people with disabilities from accessing best resources for education. Thus, this provides equivalent approach to educational resources among the students.
4. Innovation  
As far as innovation is concerned, “the COVID-19 pandemic created

advantages for virtual learning, such as acquiring digital skills faster” (Burgess et al., 2020). Furthermore, the presence of artificial intelligence (AI) currently leads the human intellect in several extents (Anton Korinek, 2017) and it is derived from the quantum computing which can manage complex issues involving the humankind and ecosystem (R.L.Adams, 2017). Hence, the academicians can utilize the students in order to gain a better insight of virtual learning’s impact towards work and the learning activities (Xie et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

To sum up, the findings suggest that the relevant authorities are responsible to address the challenges of virtual learning confronted by the local higher education institution. Hence, in order to support the students during this challenging time and in the future, relevant authorities have to address this issue and provide excellent solution to sustain the education. Ultimately, virtual learning can be confronted with the adaptation of the ‘new normal’ gradually with the advancement and development of technology.

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