

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AMONGST INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN UNIMAS

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the landscape of the education domain. It affects the way we teach, the way we learn, and imposes novel obstacles in the way institutions of higher learning conventionally manage themselves. While all students in higher learning institutions would certainly feel the impact, there is a need to focus on the experience of international students. In an effort to combat the pandemic, Malaysia has issued a directive for Movement Control Order (MCO), starting 18 March 2020. Amongst others, this directive directly affected all universities in the country. This study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 amongst the international students in a higher education institution in Sarawak, Malaysia. Data was gathered via an online questionnaire adapted from the QS Survey Report 2020 on COVID-19. Our findings revealed that while most of the international students perceived their studies to be affected, most planned to continue with the programs that they were currently enrolled in. The students expressed deep concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their exams and classes and preferred reassurance in terms of updates on information related to academic matters.

Keywords: COVID-19 Impact, Higher Education, Malaysia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak was first discovered in late December 2019 when clusters of pneumonia cases of an unknown aetiology were found to be associated with epidemiologically linked exposure to a seafood market and untraced exposures in the city of Wuhan in the Hubei Province, China (Nishiura et al., 2020). Since then, the number of cases continued to escalate exponentially within and beyond Wuhan, spreading to all 34 regions of China by 30 January 2020. On the same day, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (Mahase, 2020).

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Many countries globally responded to the pandemic including Malaysia by imposing Movement Control Order (MCO). In Malaysia, a Movement Control Order (MCO) was imposed starting from 18 March 2020, roughly around the period when the number of cases reached three digits. Restrictions during the MCO include nationwide bans of public gathering, closure of the country's borders, and closures of schools and universities as well as public and government premises.

During the influenza outbreak, around 10% to 30% of the general public were worried about the possibility of contracting the virus (Rubin et al., 2010). With the closure of schools and business, negative emotions experienced by individuals are compounded (Van Bortel et al., 2016).

The continuous spread of the virus, strict isolation measures and delays in starting schools, colleges, and universities across the country have been expected to influence the mental health of college students. There have been reports on the psychological impacts of the epidemic on the public, patients, medical staff, children, and older adults (Cao et al., 2020; Horton, 2020). However, fewer studies have been conducted on the effects of preventive measure on university students, specifically those who are studying abroad. This paper attempts to address this gap by understanding how international students' study plans are affected by the MCO, exploring challenges faced by international students during the MCO and analysing the role of the university in providing assurance to international students during the MCO from the students' perspectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In response to the pandemic, higher education institutions in various countries utilised different methods, such as carefully cleaning their campuses after students or staff were tested positive of COVID-19, going fully online, suspending teaching activities, and granting extensions for theses, dissertations, and other written assignments. Most universities developed synchronous and asynchronous online learning approaches. This is to cater to students with different learning style preferences, and most importantly, international students who might be in different time zones and are unable to attend lectures (Crawford et al., 2020).

Constant feedback from staff and students during the period has supported university quality reviews and monitoring of online learning and teaching. Actions are required by staff in response to the feedback as part of the quality assurance mechanism. Finally, the evolving situation of COVID-19 has led to updates for teaching arrangements (e.g. workshops, laboratory, and practicum are all suspended), and some students requested a partial refund of the tuition fee (Chan, 2020).

All sectors of society, and especially education, have been affected by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis led to a crisis in education for which no one was prepared. Worldwide, school closures have impacted millions of students, the repercussions of which are yet to be identified. In order to alleviate the impact of the pandemic, emergency remote teaching' was adopted as a temporary solution (Assunção Flores & Gago, 2020).

Studies have suggested that public health emergencies can result in many psychological effects on college students, which can be expressed as anxiety, fear, and worry, among others (Mei et al., 2011). Students' anxiety may have been caused by the gradually increasing distances between

people resulting from preventive measures such as a lockdown or a quarantine. When people are forced to socially separate, with very little to no interpersonal communication, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety are more likely to develop (Xiao, 2020).

The closing of schools, universities and colleges not only disturb the teaching for students around the world; the closing also coincides with the main assessment period and many examinations have been rearranged. In higher education several colleges and universities are substituting traditional exams with online assessment tools (Upoalkpajor & Upoalkpajor, 2020).

In Portugal, in order to deal with the sudden transition from face-to-face to remote teaching, the Ministry of Education developed several initiatives by setting guidelines for schools to organise online teaching and learning was issued. Just like in Malaysia, most of the schools in Europe decided to use synchronous sessions through the online platforms Google meet and Classroom Teams provided, free of charge, by Google and Microsoft, respectively. Some schools also used Skype and Zoom platforms, the latter had some issues related to its limited use in the free of charge version as well as some security problems.

With the current situation, will this consequently affect the desire of the international students to further their studies or will they postpone their plan. According to the QS coronavirus report (2020), it was revealed that thanks to the recent announcements of the development of multiple coronavirus vaccines, a significant minority of students are feeling more hopeful about studying in 2021. Nearly a quarter (21 per cent) of prospective international students said that they wanted to start their studies earlier by introducing a potential coronavirus vaccine. 43% of prospective international students, however, said that the vaccine news did not make any difference to their plans.

Additionally, while some universities did not suffer the reduction in international students at the start of the academic year that many had feared, a significant proportion of current international students did not travel to their study destination of choice due to either a lack of face-to-face teaching provision or travel restrictions. 57% of surveyed prospective international students stated that they expect to start their studies in 2021, while 25% expect to start in 2022. Additionally, 67% of respondents stated that they would ideally like to start their studies in 2021, suggesting that interest is still high but that some students may feel pessimistic about their chances of starting in 2021.

A study conducted by Wang et al. (2020) found that the concerns about COVID-19 from the majority of the respondents (75.2%) are of them worrying that their family members getting COVID-19. The majority of respondents (69.2%) believed that they would be very likely or somewhat likely to survive COVID-19 if infected. On top of that, nearly all respondents (96.9%) desired additional information about COVID-19 and receiving regular updates for the latest information on the virus.

Kernan (2019) mentioned significant impacts on the economy of the country and individuals. Because of the outbreak, some families would lose their source of income and students might feel anxious about paying their tuition fees (Peng et al., 2012). With schools and universities either postponing classes or were using distant/remote learning methods (Kwok et al., 2020) the education and the growth of students are affected. The negative effects may be offset by implementing effective and robust social support during public health emergencies, as social

support can reduce the psychological pressure during an epidemic and change the unfavourable attitude regarding social support and help-seeking methods (Bai et al., 2005; Hall et al., 2008).

3. METHODOLOGY

The target population comprised of both undergraduates and postgraduates at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). There were 307 full-time international students in the target population. We explored how their study plans changed due to the pandemic, the challenges they faced during the MCO, and their views on how the university should play their roles in providing assurance to international students. The study instrument is a semi-structured questionnaire packet that was adapted from the QS Survey Report 2020 on COVID-19 impact on higher education. The QS questionnaire was used to benchmark against the international standards. The questionnaire was divided into four (4) sections: demographic, study plan, challenges, and university's role, with a total of 28 items. The instrument used has demonstrated an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.891$).

Google form was utilized to distribute the questionnaires to all international students listed in the tracking record database of the international relations unit of the university. The distribution is performed by providing a link to the Google form with a brief description of the purpose of the survey via email and social media. The collected data were analysed with SPSS Version 22.0 using descriptive statistics.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 216 respondents (70.3% out of the 307 full-time international students) responded to the survey. The students were from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Burundi, China, Egypt, Fiji, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Korea (South), Laos, Libya, Maldives, Morocco, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Uganda, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

Table 1: Respondents' Background

Programme	Total Students (No)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Undergraduate (UG)	91	72.5	32.7
Postgraduate (PG)	125	70.4	29.6
Master	40	75	25
PhD	85	68.2	31.8
Total Students	216	71.3	28.7

Objective 1: To understand how MCO due to COVID-19 affected the study plans of international students

Figure 1 showed whether MCO has an impact on the students' study plans. The result revealed that 79% of students were affected by the situation, 8% said there was no impact, and 13% said they were not sure about the implication of COVID-19 on their study plans. In reference to the

categories of undergraduates and postgraduates (Master and PhD), the majority of the students did indicate that their study plans were affected.

Figure 1: Impact of COVID-19 on Students’ Study Plans

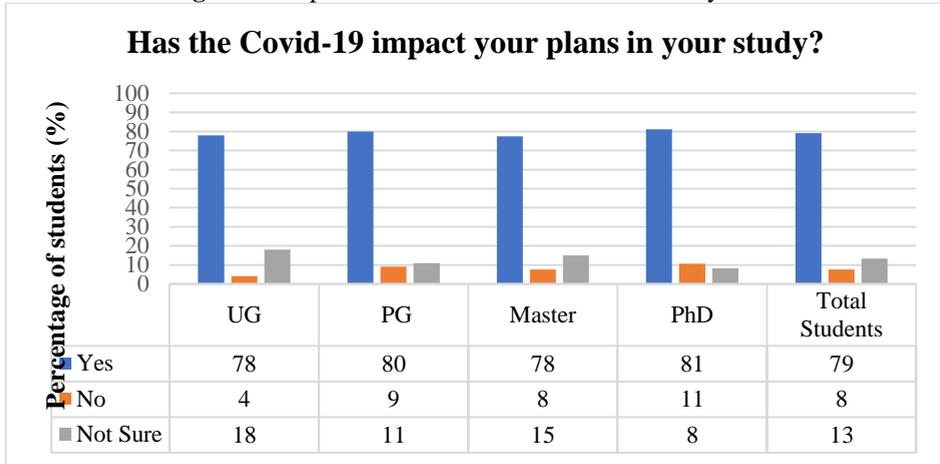


Figure 2: Impact of COVID-19 on Students’ Future Study Plans

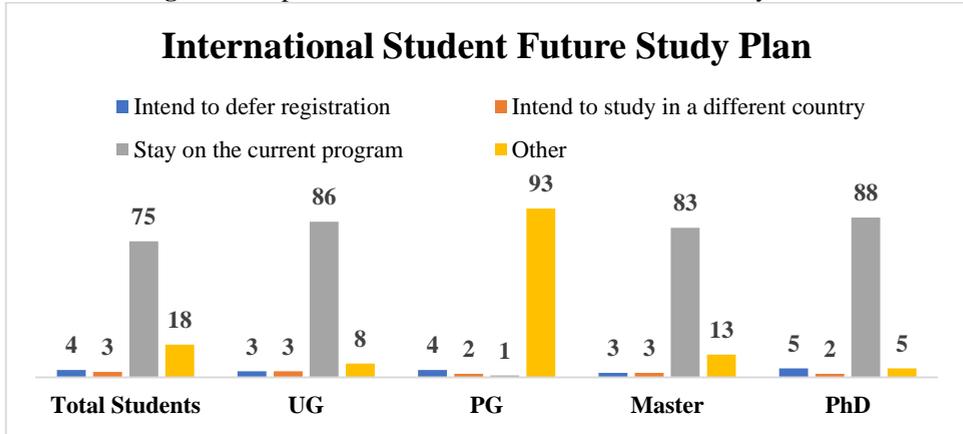
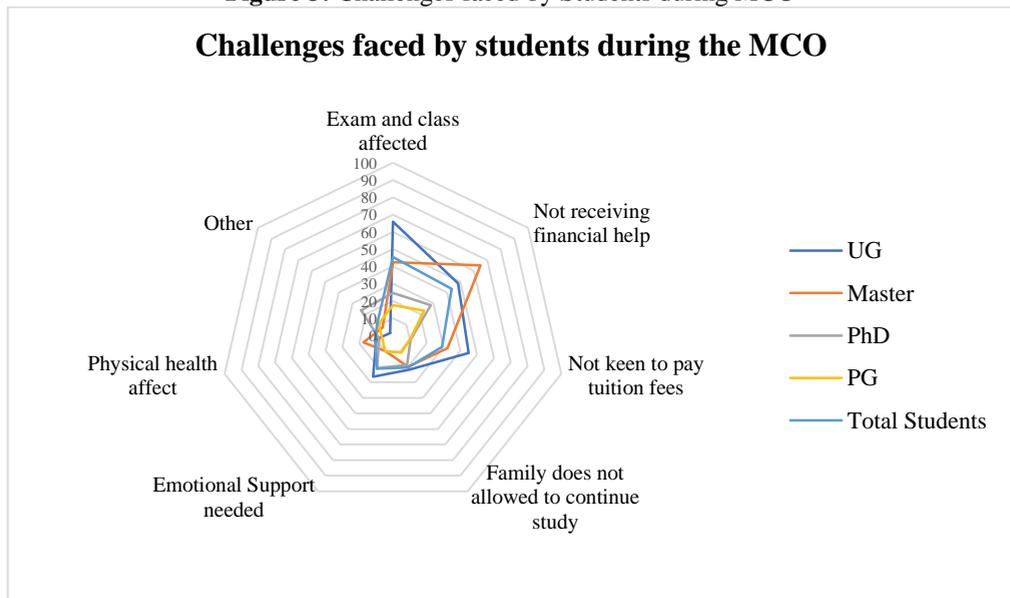


Figure 2 showed the impact on students’ future study plans. The majority of the undergraduates (UG), that is, 86%, decided to stay with the program that they were enrolled in. Only 3% of the students intended to defer their semester, while another 3% decided to study in a different country. The remaining 8% were those who were currently in their final semester and wished to finish the semester the soonest possible to return to their home countries. As for the postgraduate students, while some opted for an extension on their study to return to their home country, the majority decided to stay on their current programme and finished off their studies.

Objective 2: To explore the challenges faced by international students during Movement Control Order (MCO)

Figure 3 illustrates how the challenges differ based on the categories of students. The majority of undergraduates, i.e. approximately 70%, were more concerned about the impact on their scheduled classes and examinations. This contrasted with postgraduate students – particularly those who were studying for their master’s degree – who were more concerned about financial issues as a higher number reported no financial help during the MCO. Despite this, most postgraduates did not find university tuition fee payment as a major challenge, with only 33% not keen to continue to pay their fees. Interestingly, a higher number of undergraduates (45%) were not keen to continue to pay their fees. This may be caused by the fact that undergraduate teaching and learning revolve around classes and examinations. Hence, when classes and examination schedules are disrupted, undergraduates might feel that it is not worth it to continue to pay their university fees.

Figure 3: Challenges faced by Students during MCO



The imposed MCO brought several challenges to the international students in UNIMAS. Chief amongst the challenges are the amendments to their classes and exams, financial and tuition fee issues, inability to continue with studies, emotional or physical health issues, and others such as having to stop data collections and internship consecutively.

Findings concerning physical and emotional health revealed that UNIMAS international students considered that the lack of emotional support was a greater challenge as compared to physical health care. Slightly different findings, however, were found for master’s students, who reported that the MCO affected their physical health more than their emotional health.

The challenges involving data collections and internship were fewer however this does not mean that mentioned challenges is least significant The frequencies may be smaller due to the number of international students who were in the middle of data collection and/or internship when MCO started.

Objective 3: To analyze the role of the university in providing assurance to international students during MCO from the perspectives of the students

Table 2 shows the preferred assurance methods as viewed by the respondents. It appeared that the students favoured a constant and clear flow of communication from the university. The highest score was under the category of Effective and Transparent Communication (i.e. updating students with academic information) while Financial Assistance (financial support) was only viewed as moderately important. The least preferred assurance method is empathy or motivation from lecturers/trusted fellows (i.e. motivational stories from lecturers).

Table 2: Students' Assurance Method Preference

Assurance Method Preferences	Mean
Updating you with information related to academic	4.14
Keeping an open communication to you by giving adequate advice and reassurance	3.82
Sharing important scientific information with you	3.15
Department dealing with academic matters should be responsive	2.89
Financial support	2.67
Motivational stories from lecturers	1.35

This finding is comparable to the QS (2020) survey findings on the impact of the coronavirus on global higher education. Looking at how prospective international students and higher education institutions responded to this global health emergency; the survey highlighted the importance of open communication and adequate provision of advice to the students during the time of crisis. Frequent sharing of important scientific information with faculty and students could extend the reassurance to the students' family members. The students also wanted to be updated on the new norm, the revised academic calendar, and guidelines and procedures. The most reassuring message that the students needed, according to the QS survey, was regarding the best way to protect themselves from the virus. In addition to this, half of the respondents emphasised the importance of having a 24-hour helpline for students.

The assurance needed by the students included hygiene measures on campus, a 24/7 helpline, and online counselling and support, as well as flexibility in meeting deadlines. Their second survey indicated that students currently studying in their home countries were concerned about travel restrictions, study budgets, and challenges to complete their current studies. On the other hand, students who were already studying abroad were more pessimistic in their expectations of how COVID-19 will impact their future study plans and were more likely to consider online learning or postpone their studies.

Online learning has become the most immediate shift taken by all Higher Education Institution for both local and international students. Most institutions are responding quickly to the rising

demands for online study options for the international student community, with 85.1% of current students surveyed saying they are now taking classes online due to COVID-19. Educations.com survey shows that there is an inclination towards the digital international degree. About 45.2% of prospective students would now be interested in studying their program virtually as an alternative. However, the students require assurance in term of the quality and recognition of virtual degree.

Erasmus students' network in its webinar discussing the implications of the research results as well as further steps that can be taken to best support international students in the future. The takeaway from the webinar on what international students need as an assurance are an accessibility to the latest information – sources and resources made available in English, equal support for both local and international students, information on their right regarding the accommodations (in campus). Financial assistance is also important, but not at a higher ranking. They also include the aspects on equity, diversity and inclusion in addressing the needs of the international students. Among which is access to online learning – access sources, demographics, and maintaining interactions among students so they can stay connected.

Fintiba, a private consulting agency for international students interested in Germany as a host country, published a survey of 350 students from 66 countries in mid-May. Since it is now important to know where to find the right information and help, hence the students were asked if they feel supported by their universities. The survey reveals that the level of support felt by the students need to be improved as only half of the majority satisfied with the support in those uncertain times. Among the important support required by the students are more information and updates on current visa regulations, university procedures and travel restrictions.

From the perspective of higher education, many institutions globally are adapting to the new norm and realigning the strategic planning of institutions. It is quite likely that changes made in higher education will become permanent, especially in terms of facilitating academic delivery and communication. The financial sustainability of institutions of higher learning will surely be affected largely due to the decline in university income, despite the financial commitment that has to be done to combat the Covid-19 situation. UNIMAS, being a public university, also face the same pressure due to their inability to cover the operational cost with dwindling income due to inevitable reduction of income. This ultimately means that the university management must devise a creative way in ensuring academic and social support sustainability against COVID19 adversity.

Table 3: Immediate, Short-Term, and Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19 on higher learning institutions

Categories	Most Immediate Impact	Short Term Impact	Long Term Impact
Students	Shift toward fully online teaching and learning activity especially for taught courses and undergraduates' programs. The most affected groups are final year students and the new intake for academic session 2020/21.	Adjustment of psychomotor and practical sessions for students. Redefine relationship and communication protocol with lecturers/peers. Financial burden.	Learning Continuity and Mobility. Students' Employment

Categories	Most Immediate Impact	Short Term Impact	Long Term Impact
Lecturers	New norm at the workplace and move the teaching materials to digital content.	Redefine educator scope, virtual classroom and role as well as the communication protocol with lecturers/peers.	Continuity of teaching activity using a virtual modality. Possible termination for contract staff.
Institutions	Major disruption on the functions of Higher Education Institution.	Financial curtailment due to the cancellation of fees or reduction in student enrolment.	Decrease in the number of centres and programs. Redefine some activities to cater for the agile environment.

In terms of policy responses, Table 4 summarises the initiatives and strategies by UNIMAS to meet the challenge of Covid-19.

Table 4: Students Assurance Method Preference

Area	Categories of Policy Responses
Administrative Measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOP and Guidelines (Administrative, Academic, Health) • Adjustment of Academic Calendars • Setting up Covid-19 Taskforce • Work from Home • Facilitating Online Learning • Campus Closure • 24-hour helpline for students include Psycho-emotional Support Helpline, Returning to Campus Helpline, MCO helpline • Bring in students outside campus to stay in the residential area • Coordinate students movement back to their hometown from door to door.
Financial Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocation of Special Funding for Covid-19 • Subsidise food for Campus Residents 3 meals a day to limit students' movement outside the campus and to ease their financial burden • Dry Food Aid to those outside of the campus • Notebook and Internet Access Assistance to the students in need • Enhancement of Network Facilities in Campus
Provision of Resources to enhance academic activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CALM, PPPA, BJKA, UNIMAS Global, CITDS are working closely with 10 Faculties to facilitate the implementation of online learning activities. Training on Online Tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Team, Webex etc. • Investing in new technologies and training to embrace the new norm

5. CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has made students and universities adapt quickly to the changing circumstances. The international students are also reflecting the uncertainty being felt by the world in the face of COVID-19. Although, the students' study plans and experiences are inevitably being disrupted. Nevertheless, their focus appeared to remain firmly on their studies. With vaccines potentially set to be distributed in the new year or earlier and international student interest remaining strong, higher education institutions can look forward to positive shifts in 2021.

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