

# CAN YOU HEAR MY VOICE?: ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCE FROM A SEMESTER OF SUDDEN ONLINE LEARNING

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**Abstract:** *Much like their peers in many universities around the world, students of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) experienced their first full-time implementation of online learning during the 2020 government-mandated lockdown. An attempt was made to understand the preparedness and concerns of students prior to the carrying out of online learning in UiTM. Analysis of the questionnaire disclosed students' concerns on their ability to understand and focus with classes and a fear of technical failures. After the semester ended, another questionnaire was issued to the same set of students with more questions exploring their opinions, preferences and experience. Review of answers discovered aspects of online learning liked and disliked by students, and also factors that most negatively impacted their online learning experience. Additionally, a further investigation on responses of students that answered both questionnaires showed some of them changed their minds on several aspects after experiencing online learning. This discloses a possibility of further acceptance of the online learning system when students' fears and issues are properly addressed in the future.*

**Keywords:** *Online learning, ODL, student's experience, online learning issues.*

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## Introduction

In March 2020, the government of Malaysia announced the implementation of nationwide lockdown as a means to control the spread of COVID-19 pandemic (Habibullah et al., 2021)(New et al., 2020). The announcement results in massive changes on the ways Malaysians conduct their lives but most importantly in the discussion of this research, universities are suddenly forced (Ploj et al., 2019) to move their learning online with little to no time to get ready. Originally as an effort to get ready for researchers' own classes online learning, a questionnaire was distributed to researchers' students in UiTM. With little understanding of

how online learning would be implemented, students reflected fear on their ability to cope with the new method, a findings that are reflected in several studies (Kaur et al., 2021)(Deena et al., n.d.)(Al et al., n.d.). The first semester of COVID-19 mandated online learning in UiTM finished in August 2020 and realizing the opportunity of understanding and comparing students' sentiments from before and after this initial online learning implementation, another questionnaire was distributed to the same group of students. This questionnaire includes similar questions from the previous ones, and additional questions to further probe students' experience.

Several research studies have been conducted to understand students' experience with online distance learning. Research was conducted via online survey to explore college students' emergency remote teaching experiences during COVID-19 crisis (Shin & Hickey, 2020)(Bond et al., 2021). Another conducted a qualitative study using participants' diaries, reflective essays, and an online focus group to explore and interpret students' experiences (Rahiem, 2020)(Cernicova-Buca et al., 2021). Researchers used an online questionnaire to study students' and lecturers' experiences concerning online distance learning during COVID-19 (Schlenz et al., 2020). A similar study was also done on both students and lecturers where satisfaction surveys (Sharma et al., 2021)(Kovačević et al., 2021) were given to students, and an online focus group was conducted for lecturers to learn the experiences of both students and lecturers(Chierichetti & Backer, 2021)(Elzainy et al., 2020).

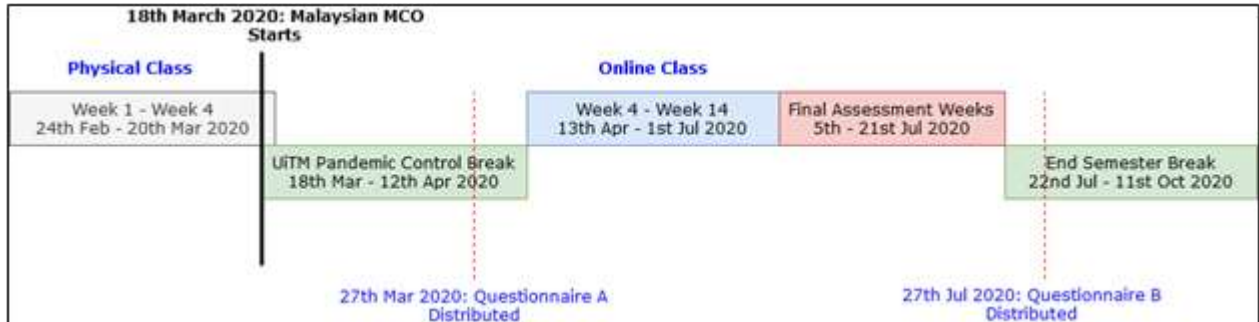
This paper discusses the findings from both questionnaires distributed before and right after the first semester of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) implementation. A comparison of answers by students who answered both questionnaires is also examined in an effort to investigate any significant change of situation and sentiment after their experience of online learning.

### **Methodology**

Two questionnaires were distributed in the development of this research. The first questionnaire, hereby dubbed Questionnaire A was first distributed as a means to gauge students' readiness and preference on ODL before researchers' own implementation of this learning system. Questionnaire was distributed to nine classes ranging from students in Semester 3 to Semester 6 of Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences, UiTM Melaka. Convenience sampling was used, whereby these nine classes were students of researchers. This questionnaire probed students' situation on their device's ownership, internet availability, preference in lecture and assignment arrangements, and their concerns with regards to online learning. This questionnaire was distributed using Google Form on 27th March 2020 during the university's Pandemic Control Break and answered by 235 respondents.

Students were invited to answer Questionnaire B, titled 'Students Experience on Online Learning' after the first semester of ODL was concluded. This questionnaire was first distributed using Google Form on 27th July 2020, during the end semester break to the same nine classes of students that originally answered Questionnaire A. While Questionnaire A was more concerned on understanding students' situation as preparation to start ODL, Questionnaire B was intended to evaluate students' feeling, experience and sentiment after finishing their first semester of ODL. The questionnaire was divided into several sections: a general section on general ODL questions, four sections probing into factors that might impact their experience of ODL which include psychological, domestic expectations, facilities and financial. Questionnaire B was answered by 168 respondents, consisting of 114 female students and 54

male students. Figure 1 shows the dates Questionnaire A and B were distributed during UiTM's first ODL semester.



**Figure 1: Timeline of Questionnaires Distribution against UiTM Academic Calendar**

Additionally, in Questionnaire B, there is a section with similar questions from Questionnaire A to investigate a difference of answers before and after ODL implementation. This section questioned students again on devices, internet, lecture and assignment preferences, and their online learning concerns. 152 students answered both questionnaires.

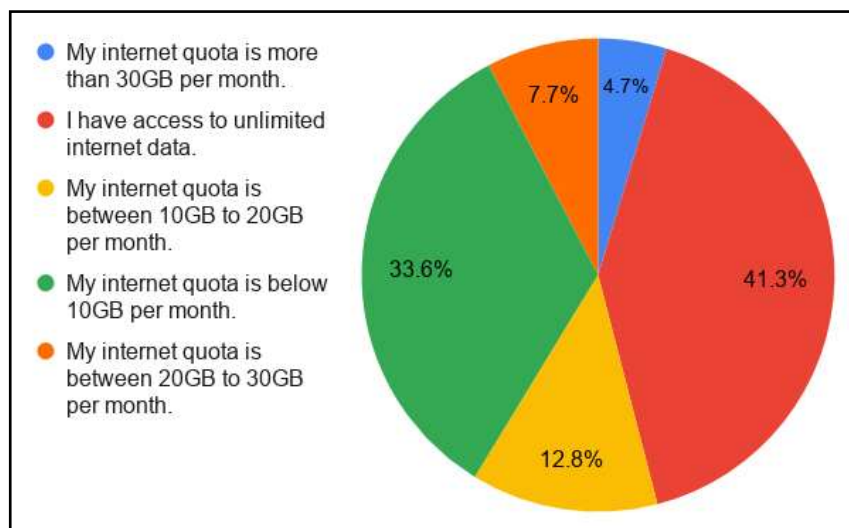
As Questionnaire A was intended to discover functional information and not opinions, Questionnaire B as companion was designed to reflect the construction of its sibling. Therefore, both questionnaires were not adapted from any existing instruments.

## Findings

Findings of the research in this paper is divided into three sections: insights from Questionnaire A, insights from Questionnaire B, and comparison of Questionnaire A and B answers.

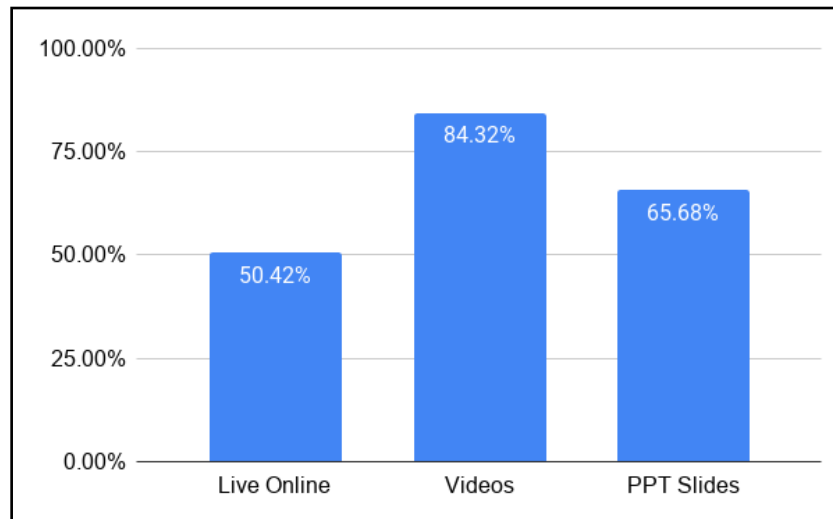
### Insights from Questionnaire A

Among the researchers' main concern at the beginning of the online distance learning was the students' device and internet quota availability. Most of the students have both smartphones and computers/laptops. However, not all have access to unlimited internet data. 58.8 % of the students had less than 30GB per month, with 33.6 % only having less than 10GB per month. This is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Student Internet Quota**

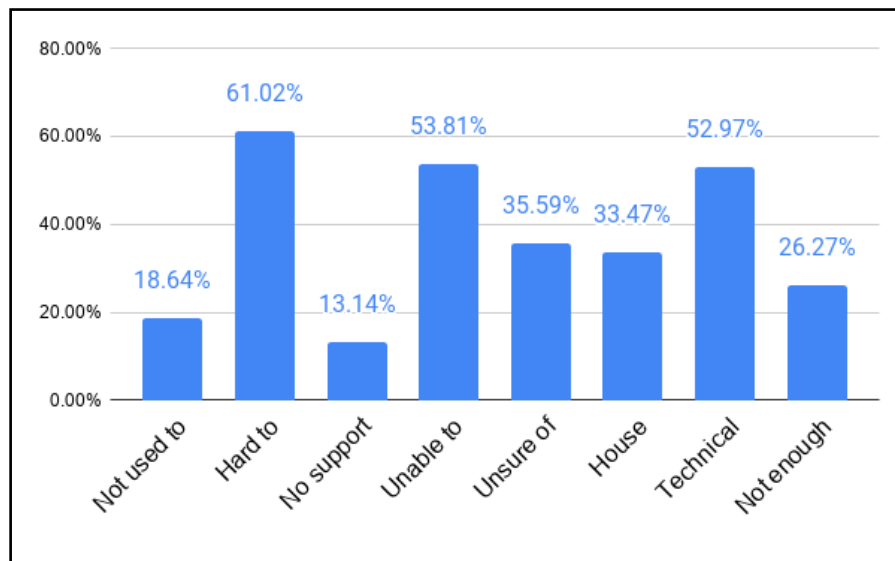
Due to the internet quota limitation, it is not surprising when asked about the students' lecture preference, 84% of students prefer to download and watch lecture videos at their own time, followed by downloading slides (65.58%) and live online classes (50.42%). The students were allowed to select more than one class lecture preference, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Class Lecture Preference**

In terms of doing assignments, 37% of students prefer to work in a team of two to three people, while only 29.8% prefer to do the projects individually. The remaining 33.2% prefer to work in a group of four or five students. This shows that although the students prefer to do projects in groups, they do not want the group to be too large. In terms of tutorial sessions, the students were asked whether they prefer to have live online tutorial sessions or work independently and submit the tutorial at their own time, with a method to ask lecturers for support. The students were allowed to choose more than one answer. 89.41% of the students choose to work on the tutorial on their own time, and 41.95% choose to have live sessions. Again, the considerable difference between these two methods is due to the limited internet quota of the students.

Figure 4 shows the students' main concerns when they were told the whole semester would be conducted as online distance learning. The students were asked to select any three concerns. The top three concerns were fear of not being able to understand the courses online (61.02%), unable to focus (53.81%), and fear of technical failure (52.97%). It is understandable why the students choose these concerns as they would be studying alone at home, without their peers and friends to discuss with them if they do not understand a topic or face technical problems. The other concerns were unsure of how the online assessment will be conducted (35.59%), unsuitable home environment (33.47%), fear of not having enough internet data for online classes (26.27%), fear of not being able to get used to online distance learning (18.64%) and finally, fear of not being able to receive support from lecturers and friends (13.14%).



**Figure 4: Concerns Students had before ODL**

### **Insights from Questionnaire B**

Questionnaire B is more than twice the length of Questionnaire A. It includes more detailed questions on students' ODL experience, their likes and dislikes, and factors that have negatively impacted their ODL for a total of 30 questions. For the sake of brevity, this paper touches only the surface of Questionnaire B findings.

#### **a) ODL Aspects Liked and Disliked by Students**

Based on their experience of ODL, students were asked two questions on aspects of ODL. One question on aspects they liked and another on what they disliked. They were not limited on the amount of elements that they can choose for these questions. Figure 5 shows the graph of the ODL aspects they liked based on percentage of cases. Here the top three aspects as chosen by more than 80 percent of students are 'being able to stay home', 'not having to travel to class' and 'save on expenses'. These three top aspects can possibly be understood as ODL being most liked for its cost saving element. The lowest liked aspect of ODL with only 13.1% respondents having chosen the option is 'online group project'. This might be due to the difficulties in arranging and ensuring equal contributions for group projects. Significantly, the two options related to each other 'asynchronous class: able to study at own time' and 'flexible hours' are not ranked high, with the latter even placed as the second lowest option at 45.24%. This might imply that students prefer a more fixed schedule rather than having the independence of studying at their leisure.

Meanwhile, Figure 6 shows aspects of ODL disliked by students grouped by percentage of cases. The top four aspects that are most disliked listed in order of their rank are 'technical issues with the internet', 'not able to receive assistance from lecturers', 'not being with friends' and 'technical issues with devices'.

The first and fourth-ranked aspects can be categorized as technical issues while the second and third-ranked might be seen as students missing both the academic and emotional support previously readily available from their lecturers and friends on campus. The option 'online group project' is also one of the more highly disliked aspects in this question, consistent with the answer in the previous question.

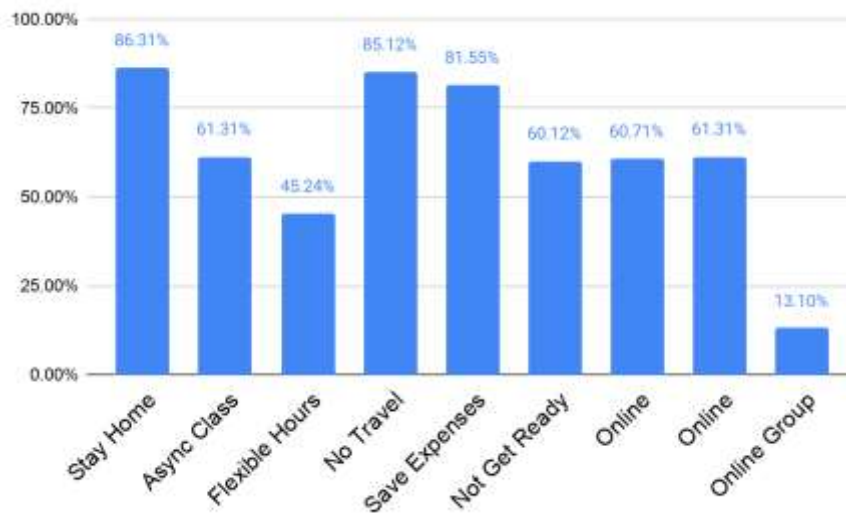


Figure 5: Aspects of ODL Liked by Students

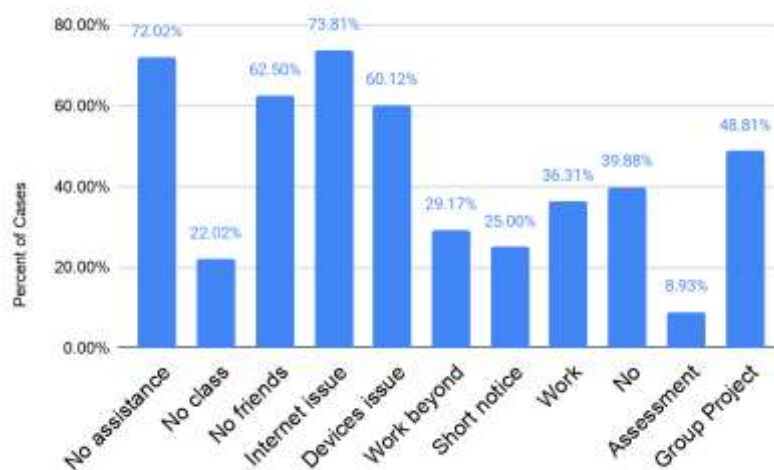


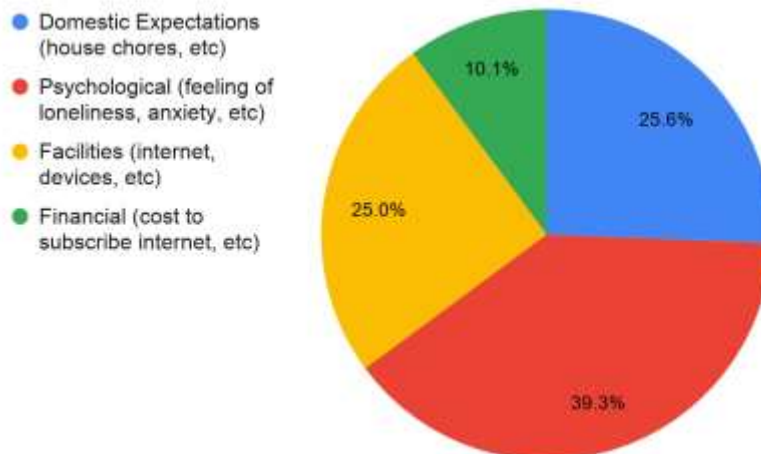
Figure 6: Aspects of ODL Disliked by Students

### b) Factors Most Negatively Impacted Students ODL

Students were also asked to choose one from four options on the factor that most negatively affected their ODL experience. Figure 7 shows the results. The highest factor chosen by more than one-third of the students is 'Psychological'. Psychological factors as described in the questionnaire include feelings of loneliness and anxiety among others. The second highest factor is 'Domestic Expectations', whereby here it is explained as expectations for students to contribute to domestic chores. The third highest factor as chosen by students is 'Facilities', situations associated with technical problems with internet access and devices and finally the least chosen factor is 'Financial', highlighting all the costs needed to join online classes such as data subscriptions. The reason financial is the last-ranked factor might be while there were additional costs students needed to bear, they were also able to save a lot from staying at home and not having to travel.

A look at the answers when segregated by genders shows the same choice of 'Psychological' as the highest factor that most negatively affected students' ODL for both male and female students. Both genders also chose 'Financial' as the least concerning factor of ODL. An

interesting finding however is discovered: male students voiced a higher grievance on ‘Domestic Expectations’ with 29.63% of them choosing this factor, ranking it as second compared to female students who are more bothered by ‘Facilities’ factors at their second place. It is also noteworthy that a higher percentage of male students (44.44%) chose ‘Psychological’ as their most important problem compared to female students (36.84%).



**Figure 7: Factors Most Negatively Impact Students ODL**

**Table 1: Comparisons of Factors Most Negatively Impact Students ODL by Gender**

Factors	Percentage		Rank	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Psychological	44.44%	36.84%	1	1
Domestic expectations	29.63%	23.68%	2	3
Facilities	12.96%	30.70%	3	2
Financial	12.96%	8.77%	3	4

### c) Students Preference of Learning System

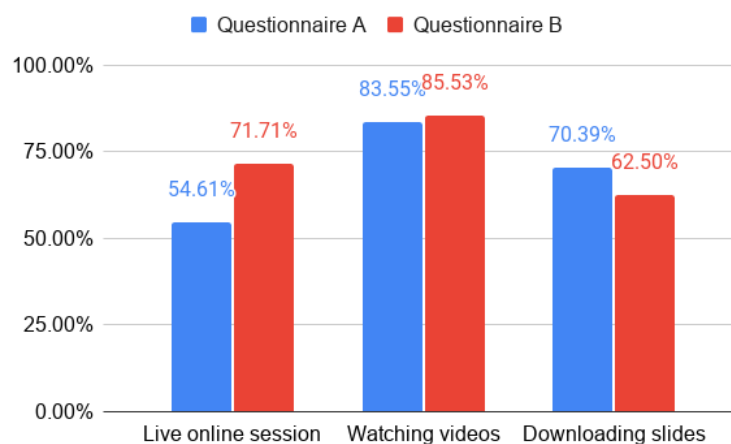
ODL as a system allows flexibility, freeing both educators and learners from the constraints of time and place. It is, however, cannot be assumed that given a chance to choose between an ODL system and traditional physical classroom system that ODL will always be chosen. In Questionnaire B, students were asked to choose between ODL and physical class next semester, an overwhelming majority of 70.8% students chose physical class. A deeper look at the respondents of this question shows a similar sentiment for both genders where 66.7% male and 72.8% female students chose physical class for the next semester. Therefore it can be said that ODL implementation as it was in the first semester can still be improved to make it more agreeable for students and not as negatively skewed. A first step can be further analysis of the four factors of Psychological, Domestic Expectations, Facilities and Financial as a subject for another paper.

### Comparison between Questionnaire A and B

As stated in the methodology section of this paper, there exists a section in Questionnaire B with similar questions as asked in Questionnaire A. Here the answers of the 152 students that answered both Questionnaire A and B are analyzed for significant changes on their answers from before and after experiencing ODL.

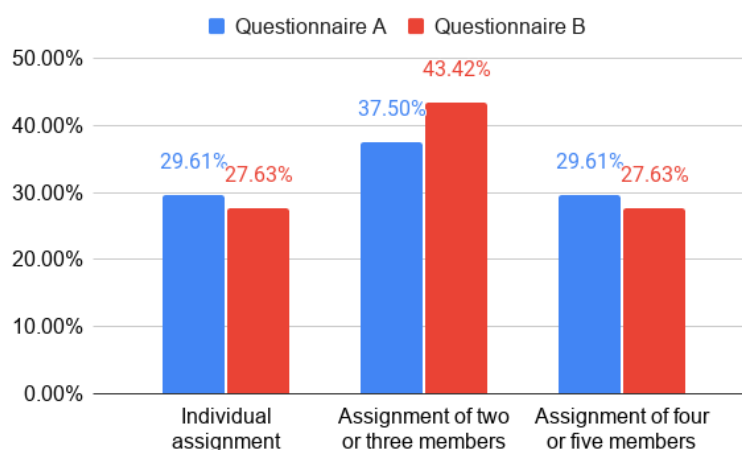
From the 152 respondents, about 20% of the students bought new devices for their ODL classes. Additionally, more than half of them (57%) have also upgraded or changed their internet quota to make sure that their studies will be less affected.

When Questionnaire A was distributed, most students preferred to watch pre-recorded videos for the lecture session. Students still prefer this method as this shows the highest percentage in Questionnaire B. Next, students preferred to download slides and study on their own (Questionnaire A). However, after 6 months having ODL, they changed their preference to live online sessions. Although less data is required to download slides, students still prefer online live sessions. We can see that relying on slides alone is not preferable by the students as shown Figure 8. The students can choose more than one answer for this question.



**Figure 8: Students Preference on Lecture Delivery**

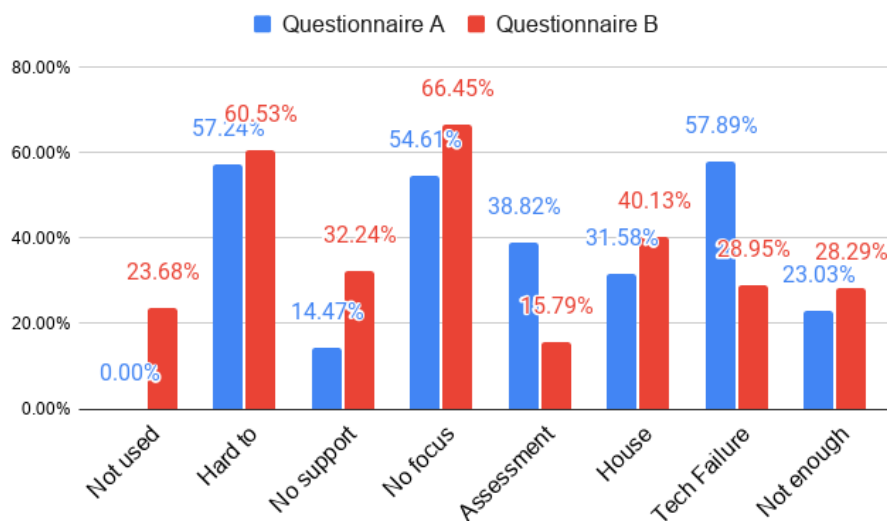
For assignment preference, students can choose more than one answer and the result shows that students prefer a smaller group that is two to three members per group (based on Figure 9). In Questionnaire B, we can see more students agree that this smaller group is the most suited for them to work with others on their assignment. Working individually is less preferred as students may have lack of confidence to do the assignment. Also, too many members in a group are less preferred too as they may have problems in communicating with others.



**Figure 9: Students Preference on Assignment**



Lastly, we asked the students about what they were concerned with the most during ODL. Students can choose more than one answer for this question. When ODL was first introduced in March, the students were more concerned about technical failure, difficulty in understanding their studies and lastly no focus to study. After six months, the students were more concerned about ability to focus, difficulty to understand and not having a good house environment. Besides, from Figure 10, we can see that the students are concerned that they are not used to ODL, no support and not having a good house environment. However, the students are less worried about their assessment after they have gone through 6 months of ODL.



**Figure 10: Comparison in Main Concerns**

### Conclusions

In the March - July Semester 2020 in UiTM, ODL was an emergency measure to ensure education continuation in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. The announcement by university was received with a significant amount of trepidation, reflected by analysis of Questionnaire A distributed before implementation of ODL. The top three concerns are hard to understand, unable to focus and technical failure. Having experienced a semester of ODL, students admitted to liking certain aspects of ODL, especially the cost-saving elements through their answers in Questionnaire B, distributed then. It was however discovered features such as flexibility in learning time are not really preferred. They also disliked not having support from lecturers and friends, and faced technical difficulties while learning. Majority of respondents also chose the 'Psychological' factor as the one that most negatively affected their ODL experience. With that said, comparison of answers by students that responded to both Questionnaire A and B showed a change of opinion in several aspects. For example at first students are concerned about technical failure, difficulty in understanding and no focus to study. But later, they are more concerned with their house environment than of technical failure.

It is difficult to identify if the negative sentiments students showed comes from only ODL implementation or it is mixed up with the anxiety and fear of being in a pandemic lockdown. However, the concerns they raised are valid and worthy of being addressed, and as shown in this research, students are capable of changing their minds when their experience is good. Therefore, further research should be undertaken by educators, instructional designers, psychologists and user experience researchers among others with the purpose of providing better ODL implementation by tackling issues highlighted here.

## Acknowledgment

All authors contributed equally to this paper, and the order of authors' names is alphabetical.

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