SHORT COMMUNICATION

Unparalleled Experiences of Online Medical Education during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia has adversely affected the country in many aspects especially the economy and education sectors. Schools and universities alike are facing challenges in providing quality education to students. Many strategies have been recommended to improve the quality of online teaching to enhance students' engagement in the teaching-learning processes. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are one of the alternative teaching strategies to advocate the students to access education remotely. It is time to take advantage of the uncertain period of COVID-19 into an opportunity to develop the MOOCs for the students.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic had affected Malaysia as likewise all over the world, especially the economy and educational services. Educational institutions comprising of schools, medical colleges, and universities are facing challenges to provide quality education to the students during the pandemic where the first Movement Control Order (MCO) was imposed in Malaysia in effect from 18 March 2020 (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020).

Online teaching and learning are mainstream discussed among educators. Before that announcement made on 16 March 2020, public universities have strongly encouraged lecturers to adopt online teaching and learning methods such as e-learning

platforms and open educational resources (OER) to reduce the mass gathering of students (Chung et al., 2020). Malaysian Higher Education Ministry has approved for all higher education institutions to conduct online teaching or e-learning (Malay Mail, 2020). The Ministry also emphasised that online teaching could only be conducted if all students have access to lecturers and all infrastructure requirements are in place.

With the COVID-19 crisis, universities around the world have been directly and indirectly affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The faculties even in the most technologically developed education systems are struggling to transition to fully online courses. The faculties in the United States, though they had set up online Learning Management System (LMS) platforms for their on-campus courses at the beginning of the semester, took time and work to make their course fully online using synchronous online platforms, such as zoom (Johnson et al., 2020). Higher education institutions with well-established IT infrastructure were given more autonomy and flexibility in the remote education panning with some general guidelines and resources (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

The New Norm of Online Medical Education and Challenges

This short communication aims to present the challenges encountered by the medical students and educators at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) in the era of the new norm created by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the COVID pandemic, the MCO in Malaysia was first implemented on 18 March 2020. During this period, fortunately, the faculties in UMS are actively conducting online education using the smartV3 UMS learning management system which has been well established. FMHS has well-established

Communication and Information Technology Department's well-trained staff, which very well facilitate online delivery of lectures and educational content (Liew et al., 2018). FMHS management decided synchronous or asynchronous online teaching systems replacing all face-to-face teaching and examinations. Thus, we must amend all the teaching and assessments to go online from preclinical year to clinical year module tests, semester and end posting examinations, nursing examinations, etc. But this has become incredibly challenging for the clinical years regarding bedside teaching, objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) and clinical examinations. To improve the quality of teaching in the current situation, the faculty management decided to standardize the use of the Google platform (Google Meet and Google Classroom) in addition to the smart e-learning management system.

The transition from traditional to virtual online learning has its challenges (ODoherty et al., 2018). It is required in preparing online examinations, attendance, etc. in a standardised format (formatted assessment). We must look at different options for different scenarios when there is limited internet connectivity or low bandwidth limitations or no internet at all.

Strategic Implementation (The Way Forward)

E-learning centre of Universiti Malaysia Sabah established new directions with strategic and action plans enhancing the widening access to online learning as it is an important element of the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint 2015 – 2025. (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015) During the uncertain period of CMCO at the COVID pandemic, MOOC has risen as an alternative open online education in addition to other educational platforms like MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) based smartV3 learning management system, which is well established at the FMHS, UMS (Seng et al.,2018).

The dedicated academicians have made special efforts in the design, development and implementation of MOOC, blended learning activities and open educational resources (OER); which have provided the students with transformative learning experiences. The FMHS is one of the Platinum Award recipients of the Faculty Blended Achievement Award. In the need of the hour of COVID-19 pandemic, the faculty aims to the development of MOOC. MOOC can be alternatively considered for remote self-paced flexible learning despite the challenges (Shaista et al.,2020). And having less educational time commitment to digital content demonstration (Cullen et al., 2019).

In the teaching and learning activities, the lecturers use PowerPoint presentations, Microsoft Word Document and short videos for practical and clinical skill laboratory (CSL) classes. Some lecturers are also using social media such as Telegram, WeChat, WhatsApp and video conferencing tools like Zoom, Cisco-WebEx and Microsoft Teams to deliver or stream their lectures. They also pre-record lectures and presentations using screen recorder applications.

The E-learning committee of UMS recently conducted brief refresher courses to lecturers on the conduct of examinations such as Multiple Essay Question (MEQ), Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) and Objective Structured Practical Examination (OSPE) using the smart3UMS platform. Training was also given for OSCE and viva examinations at the Google Meet platform. This will become the first online examination ever at technology-driven modalities.

Many strategies have been recommended to improve the quality of online teaching and enhancing student engagement (Gewin,2020). Thus, to maximize their impact, need to identify the learning strategies best suited to the academic environment and socio-cultural norms. In fact, the FMHS had been on the track of the development and implementation of MOOC. It is time to take advantage of the uncertain period of COVID-19 into an opportunity to develop MOOC. MOOCs are one of the teaching strategies which facilitate learning remotely. These courses usually have open access and do not usually offer course credit for participants, but some courses offer certificates of completion. These courses can be attended by hundreds of students at their own pace and enabling them to assess the courses from any part of the country at the comfort of their homes or hostels. Even though there are few drawbacks like the language barrier and non-credit-earning courses at universities, MOOC has a lot of potential for reinventing the way studies can be substituted (Peterson, 2020; Srikanth, 2020).

The benefits of MOOCs are self-paced, self-directed learning, interactive, and accessibility by unlimited users. Based on the key online discussion, we can create forums, assignments, and quizzes enabling the students to actively participate in discussions and assessments.

CONCLUSION

To develop a consolidated MOOC, we need to plan a detailed outline or script to map out the course content and make it more interactive and engaging to the students, to exchange ideas and share feedback in real-time, is essential for the advancement of faculty. Hopefully, MOOCs will open new learning strategies best suited in Medical Education and be better prepared for the future.

DISCLAIMER

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