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Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of Forced Online Learning amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study in Indonesia

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Introduction

A growing number of studies have explored students' perceptions of online learning in higher education. However, little is still known about how postgraduate students view forced online learning (FOL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this current study aims to report postgraduate students' perceptions of forced online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview data via class group WhatsApp messages were gathered from 17 postgraduate students at one of the universities on the northern island of Indonesia. The semi-structured interview data were then thematically analyzed to find out their lived experiences during forced online learning. Findings show that postgraduate students face technological, socio-cultural, and instructional constraints with forced online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provides essential information on the several persistent restrictions and obstacles from doing forced online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesian public higher education.

Literature Review

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was announced globally (Murphy, 2020), the education sector, such as universities, has been forced to shift rapidly to distance and online learning. UNESCO (2020) reported that many countries on the African continent, the European continent, the Americas, and the Asian continent, including Indonesia (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020), have temporarily suspended educational institutions at all levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, as reported in a study of Zhu and Liu (2020), China's face-to-face teaching practices have been forbidden. Chinese universities and schools postponed the spring semester. Students cannot return to campuses without permission. The students and teachers are required to continue their teaching and learning remotely through a digital platform. Therefore, educators were forced to employ online learning to accommodate the teaching and learning process amidst COVID-19. For learners, online learning is nothing new. However, COVID-19 brings online learning back to life for exploration and teaching opportunities. An online teaching implementation plan covering the teaching delivery component, online class management, and supervision, and the assessment of learning was developed.

Due to the suspension of face-to-face classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has become a major concern. During the pandemic, online learning was used to implement, plan and deliver



learning. However, online learning at universities is not free from obstacles. Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh, and Althunibat (2020) found that in the COVID-19 pandemic, providing and using online learning materials in the online learning system is a significant challenge for universities. Another study, conducted in one of Jamaica's largest and oldest universities, found that critical success factors influenced student perception and use in online learning settings (Barclay, Donalds, & Osei-Bryson, 2018). These factors are developing a financial climate; including supportive cultural practices, having access to computers, system or online environments, computer and online learning self-efficiency, user knowledge, and user-friendliness. In their review paper on the challenges of integrating e-learning with a particular emphasis on developing countries, Aung and Khaing (2016) stressed that universities in developing countries face specific challenges compared to developed countries and suffer from overcrowded classrooms. They found that lack of ICT knowledge, inadequate network infrastructure, and slow content creation were crucial challenges facing online learning in developing countries.

While online learning contributes to learning convenience for students, lecturers, and institutions, there are still many barriers to its implementation (Moorhouse, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). For example, in developing countries like Jordan, the students found that technological, individual, cultural, and course challenges were critical challenges in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh, & Althunibat, 2020). Moorhouse (2020) concluded that at least two online learning problems, namely learning to be lecturer-centered and the interaction gap between lecturers and students, widen due to various technical constraints and limited access. Therefore, this study is crucial to provide novelty related to ongoing master's degree students' perceptions and challenges in implementing forced online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, at this challenging time, the question is not whether online teaching-learning approaches will provide quality education but rather how academic institutions can embrace online learning in such a massive way (Carey, 2020), especially concerning postgraduate student learning in forced fully online programs. Therefore, this study investigates postgraduate students' perceptions of forced online learning (FOL) during the COVID-19 pandemic based on the challenges highlighted by Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh and Althunibat (2020) and Adedoyin and Soykan (2020).

Furthermore, they mentioned the technological constraints, socio-cultural constraints, and instructional constraints the students face in online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the current study are intended to lead to a deeper understanding of knowledge transfer processes as part of emergency planning and response in a pandemic situation.

Method

The Study

This online interview study aims to explore postgraduate students' perceptions of forced online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online interviews using WhatsApp (Gibson, 2020) were conducted as it was impossible to meet for face-to-face interviews with research participants during the pandemic. Because collected data came in electronic form, time is saved, and the risk of transcription errors is diminished (Stieger & Göritz, 2006). Importantly, this method allowed the researcher to adjust the interview timing to fit the participants' needs. In other words, online interviews allow researchers to explore participants' activities, experiences, and opinions in their native language.

Setting and Participants

This interview study involved third-semester postgraduate students studying at a public university in northern Sumatra, Indonesia. Students of the author took online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author announced the participants' recruitment in the WhatsApp study group consisting of 25 students. Students interested in being participants in this study were asked to contact the researcher through private

chat. Of the 25 students who joined the WhatsApp group, 17 students (14 female students and three male students) aged 23 to 40 volunteered to participate.

Table 1 presents descriptive demographic data, including gender, marital status, age, and occupation of the participants.

TABLE 1
Profile of Participants (Pseudonyms)

Participants	Gender	Marital Status	Age	Occupatoin
Aira	Female	Single	28	English Teacher
Cynthia	Female	Single	24	English Teacher
Luna	Female	Married	24	English Teacher
Eunike	Female	Single	27	English Teacher
Cantika	Female	Single	25	English Teacher
Eliz	Female	Married	40	English Teacher
Fatma	Female	Married	38	English Teacher
Salwa	Female	Married	24	English Teacher
Sinta	Female	Single	23	English Teacher
Indi	Female	Married	29	English Teacher
Lusi	Female	Single	26	English Teacher
Nia	Female	Single	24	English Teacher
Eva	Female	Married	27	English Teacher
Senni	Female	Single	25	English Teacher
Aryo	Male	Single	24	English Teacher
Arya	Male	Single	24	English Teacher
Ajun	Male	Married	39	English Teacher

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred by distributing online semi-structured interviews with postgraduate students who used online learning during their first semester at a state university in Indonesia. The interview questions concerned postgraduate students' views and experiences with online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The change from face-to-face learning methods to virtual learning methods (online classes) provides students with new perceptions. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data on technological constraints, socio-cultural constraints, and instructional constraints to evaluate participants' perceptions. The researcher interviewed 3-4 participants daily. Anonymity was achieved through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews were performed online for 1.5-2.00 hours per participant via WhatsApp from August 2020 to September 2020. The participants used the Indonesian language (75-150 words on) to respond to the interview questions. The data analysis procedure followed Widodo's (2014) steps, namely transcribing the interview and interpreting the data. Then, the researcher repeatedly read the interview data to find the critical points needed. The next step was to transcribe using a table format to encode, sort, and identify essential data.

In this study, the researcher analysed the interview data by interpreting every word and sentence conveyed by participants, communicated views, opinions, or viewpoints (inner voices) of participants, and created initial themes. The interviews aimed to get more meaningful data. Interview data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by adopting the concepts of Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) and Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh and Althunibat (2020) regarding technological, socio-cultural, and instructional constraints faced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This thematic approach aims to understand the challenges and obstacles they faced. First, the researcher read the interview data repeatedly so that it is easy to code to find emergent themes related to the challenges students faced during online learning.

Findings and Discussions

After analyzing the participants' data interview, three key themes that captured the constraints faced by postgraduate students concerning forced online learning amidst COVID-19 were identified: technological constraints, socio-cultural constraints, and instructional constraints, as can be illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Sample of Interview Data

Interview data	Coding	Theme
In my opinion, online learning is less effective because of several things, one of which is networking. For example, when in villages, the network is sometimes ugly and even lost , especially if the lights go out, the total network is lost, not there at all. (Luna, WhatsApp Interview, June, 2020)	Internet connection	Technological constraint
In my opinion, online learning is not effective because it is done by physical distancing which causes many misunderstandings , including misunderstandings when interacting when doing assignments ... (Luna, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)	Communication gap	Instructional Constraint
In teaching and learning, as a student there are also many negative effects, one of which is too much use of package quotas because learning using various online services takes up a lot of quota, automatically adding to expenses that should be minimized... (Eunike, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)	Internet quota	Socio-cultural constraint

Technological Constraints

As a precautionary measure and the only step to break the chain of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government must implement sudden lockdowns and social distancing between communities. This situation has led to another scenario where the authorities must take swift action to educate and evaluate students using virtual or online modes. Online learning was also carried out with great care so that none of this harmed their studies. Many countries tried to provide access to digital learning content using multiple sources quickly; however, challenges arose from this new arrangement. Aung and Khaing (2015) reported that the most significant challenge is likely to ensure that specific requirements for e-learning, such as access to ICT resources and network infrastructure, are met. In this study, technology and digital competence were found to be the most significant challenges. They include an internet network, gadget literacy, and application competence. Students are required to be literate in technology and understand various applications in online learning. Several participants narrated that this pandemic situation forced them to be more technologically literate, "Like it or not, this pandemic has pushed me to be tech-savvy" (Fatma, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020). Another student said, "The positive impact is that with online learning, as a student, I can find out that online learning can open my access to various things in online communication" (Arya, WhatsApp, July 2020). However, students also experience problems in terms of networks, especially students in remote areas. Three participants said,

In my opinion, online learning is less successful because of many things, one of which is networking. For example, the network is often ugly and even lost in villages, mainly if the lights go out, the complete network is lost. (Luna, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)

This online makes me personally acquainted with new things related to Information Technology (IT). Like it or not, this pandemic has pushed me to be tech-savvy. (Fatma, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)

The positive effect is that with online learning, as a student, I can figure out that online learning can potentially open my online communication access to different items (Arya, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)

Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) stressed that online learning depends entirely on technological devices, the internet, instructors, and students. Lousy internet connections can prevent online learning access. In applying online learning during the COVID-19 era, the availability of an internet network and a good connection is a must. The dependency of online learning on technological equipment and the equipment provision was a significant constraint for institutions, faculty, and learners. As noted by all participants, they agreed that the internet network is a critical one that must be considered. Then, Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh and Althunibat (2020) highlighted that those technical skills and support are essential to maintain and upgrade computer and network infrastructures and provide support to users when they face technical problems. However, previous research by De Paepe, Zhu, and Depryck (2018) confirmed that technology is still unreliable for students who do not have access to computers or the internet.

Socio-Cultural Constraints

The imbalance in students' socioeconomic status causes students to rely on computers and free internet on campus (Demirbilek, 2014). Due to the pandemic, it is undeniable that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds will find it challenging to adapt to online learning. The findings of Fishbane and Tomer's (2020) study of what students did without internet access during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that with increasing poverty rates in society, the level of internet accessibility decreased rapidly. Furthermore, the implication is that students with low socioeconomic power who cannot afford to have a broadband connection are most vulnerable to falling behind or facing additional challenges in online learning. Two postgraduate students shared their opinions.

The negative impact, as a student, I objected from a financial point of view when studying online. Where I live, the signal sometimes doesn't work stably so to support this online learning I have to rent a Wi-Fi ID with a budget of almost Rp. 300,000 per month so that the network is connected to the internet in a stable manner (Arya, WhatsApp Interview, June 2020).

As students, there are also many adverse effects, one of which is too much package quotas. Learning uses various online, which takes up many quotas, automatically add expenses that should be minimized. So, in this case, it can be concluded that this online learning system has many deficiencies in the learning process (Eunike, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020).

Students also complained that there was no reduction in tuition fees, despite lectures being considered ineffective. The following interview data describes their complaints about their tuition fees during the pandemic.

Then because of this corona, mam learning online without being face-to-face. I have my friends' feelings. We feel a loss because tuition fees are too expensive, while lectures are less useful for me... Obstacles vary from the time, location, signal, and chemistry, often confused if followed in bits and pieces without scrolling above or early (Fatma, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)

I feel very disadvantaged, honestly, because my college costs are very high (Cantika, WhatsApp Interview, August 2020)

These findings align with De Paepe, Zhu, and Depryck's (2018) exploratory study, whose participants included seven educators: two school advisors, an online teacher, a teacher trainer, an instructional designer,

an editor, and a social intranet consultant; and six providers in Flanders. The findings emphasized that when students learn online, they frequently incur high production costs. Carey (2020) also emphasized that there are decades of study in online learning and many exciting ideas and tools, but no cutting-edge costs and student learning innovations. Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh and Althunibat (2020) found that financial support is one of the challenges e-learning projects face due to limited resources and a large budget deficit in their interview study with 61 participants from six Jordanian public universities. Their study (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh & Althunibat, 2020) with 61 participants from six public universities also found that financial support is one of the obstacles facing e-learning projects. Jordanian universities have limited resources and have a large budget deficit.

During forced online learning, the postgraduate students also found a new culture in their daily life. As an example, Luna, an English teacher, mentioned:

Everywhere, I bring my cellphone and always get a power bank, so I do not run out of battery, and my experience is that I sweep the house while studying online, mam. Sometimes during the fasting month, I stay up late doing my assignment. I do not sleep until dawn, mam. Sometimes until dropping, mam (WhatsApp Interview, August 2020)

The same conclusion was drawn by Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh, and Althunibat (2020). Participants noted that culture is a critical factor in raising the adoption rate of the e-learning system among students. Another significant aspect is the link with students via various social media, such as Jordan's primary media and applications.

Instructional Constraints

Online learning implemented by universities during the COVID-19 pandemic is a new experience for participants. They had no experience of learning via the online learning approach before the pandemic. However, during the quarantine (lockdown), students were forced to adapt to online learning at a very urgent time. Based on the interview results, postgraduate students need to adapt to changing schedules and multiple assignments, unclear instructions due to the internet network's instability. These ideas were expressed by participants in the interview data as follows.

The issue is that lecturers are very limited in presenting content or explanations for what to do, often only giving topics and telling students to do assignments. (Senny, WhatsApp Interview, August 2020)

Lecturers only give a lot of assignments without any prior discussion/explanation regarding the learning/assignments given to students (Sinta, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)

In my opinion, online learning is not effective because it is done by physical distancing which causes many misunderstandings, including misunderstandings when interacting when doing assignments in groups because each student is in a hometown where not all of them have good signals, so some cannot be contacted and not respond, that's where there is often a misunderstanding between students who think one of their friends does not care about the assignment and this also happens between lecturers and students. (Luna, WhatsApp Interview, July 2020)

As Larmuseau, Desmet, and Depaepe (2019) stated, the standard of instruction perceived by students increases the quality of student learning but not the quantity of use. This indicates that how often one uses the internet does not impact what they are learning. If learning instructions are adequate and straightforward, learners can benefit a lot from online learning.

Students also feel uncomfortable asking and answering questions in the online learning room. This inconvenience stems from signal instability and a lack of confidence to ask online questions, rendering

conversation vague. Due to students' inability to ask questions, instructions from lecturers became increasingly unclear to students. One participant noted that:

And there's also a sense of self-will to ask questions online. It will be different if face-to-face; the confidence to ask questions will be more substantial because facial expressions are attached and make the lecturers realize we want to learn (Senny, WhatsApp Interview, August 2020)

Also, students complained that the many assignments provided by the lecturers were not given feedback. This condition, of course, leaves students uncertain of whether their work is right or not. One participant spoke in an interview.

Not only that, the worst thing is that there's no input from lecturers to students, so we don't know whether what we're doing is right or not, what needs improvement, etc. (Senny, WhatsApp Interview, August 2020)

Wang et al. (2020) advocated that online education stems from good planning and instructional design. It is a complex process that can be applied in any industry. It has been influenced by several theories and models which have been adapted from traditional offline education. Universities' crisis response measures adopt only delivery media without taking into account online education theories and models. Therefore, it is wrong to compare the crisis-response migration due to the pandemic to effective online education or universities' digital transformation. From the interview results, the author concluded that postgraduate students prefer studying outside the network due to the convenience of communicating without internet network dependency. This can be seen from one of the participants' interview statements.

However, offline learning is easier. Students can understand more easily by communicating directly and creating chemistry with lecturers face-to-face because they rely on internet networks (Aira, Whatsapp Interview, September 2020)

This finding was in accordance with a study conducted by Huang (2019). Using quantitative measurement with 153 first-year students who were enrolled in the blended English course at the university, Huang (2019) found that teachers had a more significant effect on face-to-face (F2F) learning in students' eyes than in online learning. Students feel that the role of the instructor has a more significant influence in the F2F class. Students also believed that face-to-face learning would boost their interest in learning English. In the same vein, Zhu and Liu (2020) also reported that online course delivery, interaction, and data collection require a reliable digital infrastructure and platforms while learning and is disrupted by poor Internet access in higher education amidst the pandemic outbreak.

Conclusion

This current study has reported on postgraduate students' perceptions of forced online learning amidst COVID-19 within the Indonesian context. The researcher found that technology, socio-culture, and instruction are the significant constraints the participating postgraduate students face during online teaching and learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This study would help teachers, educators, educational institutions, students, and parents understand the effect of forced online learning and its impact on students' current education. Experts will be able to derive more comprehensive information which can be used to broaden the scope of the study. This study was conducted on students pursuing a postgraduate degree at one university using a limited instrument, and hence the results cannot be generalized to a larger population.

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