

ONLINE LEARNING IN PANDEMIC TIMES

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about *inspired*

inspired is a not-for-profit OUM e-magazine on the 3Ps - practice, policy and philosophy - of teaching and learning in and beyond OUM. Published thrice-yearly, it engages a readership of OUM learners, staff, tutors and the interested public. *inspired* evolved out of *TCX (Tutor Connexions)*, a now-discontinued OUM e-newsletter which saw 45 issues published over almost a decade.

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editor's note

Although a year has passed, many of us in lockdown are still grappling with the upending unreality of the prolonged pandemic which we yearn will be over soon but which nonetheless appears at times to be stretching into the yawning abyss of eternity. In the face of the uncertainties and anxieties, tribute ought to be paid to every one of us who are in one way or another endeavouring to anchor ourselves to a sense of normality and to remain steadfast in the many capacities we assume. Especially at times like this, it is only right that we strive to be more sensitive to others around us and to their plights. And it behoves us as teachers at any and all levels to inquire after our students, for they are a vulnerable group which has been greatly impacted by the pandemic. In this spirit, this issue of *inspired* features a research-based essay by the esteemed Professor Datuk Dr Mohd Tajudin Ninggal on the impact of the pandemic on online learners. The other feature in this issue is a five-minute interview with Prof Dr Siti Aishah Hashim Ali on the perks of OUM's en bloc credit transfer scheme. The regular my_philosophy column has had to be held over as it is not yet safe enough to set up a photography session.

Best wishes

Dr David Lim, Editor

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important dates

01



Undergraduate
25 Jan - 7 Feb 2021
Postgraduate
25 Jan - 7 Feb 2021

E-TUTORIALS
1 & 2

02



Undergraduate
8 Feb - 21 Feb 2021
Postgraduate
8 Feb - 21 Feb 2021

E-TUTORIALS
3 & 4

03



Undergraduate
22 Feb - 7 Mar 2021
Postgraduate
22 Feb - 7 Mar 2021

E-TUTORIALS
5 & 6

04



Undergraduate
8 Mar - 21 Mar 2021
Postgraduate
8 Mar - 21 Mar 2021

E-TUTORIALS
7 & 8

05



Postgraduate
22 Mar - 4 Apr 2021

E-TUTORIALS
9 & 10

06



Study week
22 Mar - 4 Apr 2021

07



Exam week
22 Mar - 4 Apr 2021



Between Motivation, Emotional Stability, and Online Learning in Pandemic Times

By Professor Datuk Dr Mohd Tajudin Ninggal,
Cluster of Education and Social Sciences

After almost a year of upheavals brought about by the global Covid-19 pandemic, it is becoming evident that the adjustments and changes that individuals, communities, organisations, and entire nations have had to make across all spheres of life are likely to endure and continue to shape the foreseeable future. Few expected the pandemic to be so hard-hitting in this modern era of hi-tech living. This applies no less to the education sector where most brick-and-mortar schools and universities, prepared or otherwise, have been forced to switch from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. The outcome of the abrupt online pivot varies wildly across institutions for reasons including infrastructural, technological, financial, pedagogical, and cultural readiness. Having had a head start in operating in online and distance mode, open universities have generally adapted better than conventional

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universities. Even so, in humility, there is much that open universities may learn from the experience of their conventional counterparts, and vice versa. It is in this spirit, then, that I seek to share the highlights of my recent research on the interrelationships between learner motivation, emotional stability, and online learning during the time of pandemic lockdown.

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Few expected the pandemic to be so hard-hitting in this modern era of hi-tech living.

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Imagine this scenario if you will: barely four weeks into their very first semester, first-year counselling undergraduates in a public university in the east coast of Malaysia are forced into lockdown. All face-to-face classes are suspended. Amidst the anxieties and uncertainties arising from the sudden disruption, they are told by the university that classes are henceforth to be conducted entirely online and they are to study from the safety of their respective homes. Although the disruption is global and impacts virtually all students, the thought of this brings little comfort to these first-semester students who have just transitioned from high school and scarcely tasted varsity life.

Given the circumstances, how will they cope emotionally and educationally? To what extent will these students' learning skills and personality profiles shape or determine their level of emotional equanimity and online learning success? And what role will motivation play in attenuating any of the negative effects on learning? These were the key questions that framed my research.

Comparatively, the 159 female and male student-participants of my research were in a more precarious position than the working-adult learners in open universities. Differences between the two cohorts are not absolute; still, there are clear and significant differences, the first of which has to do with the fact that, unlike working-adult learners, the subjects of my research were fresh school leavers who had just entered university. In the process of maturing into themselves, and even

without Covid-19 in the horizon, they would have faced the emotional stress of transitioning from school to university, of adjusting to adulthood and a new independent living arrangement. With the pandemic casting its long shadow on their lives, the stress became considerably compounded.

Having just emerged from at least 11 years of primary and secondary schooling, the student-participants also did not have the benefit of leveraging on the years of accumulated life, practical, and work experience that working-adult learners have. They may be digital natives adept in using the internet for social enjoyment. But as university teachers are all too aware, it is one thing to be able to share stories, images, and comments on social media platforms, and it is another thing altogether to be able to use digital technologies to locate specific resources, sift through and evaluate those resources for relevance and credibility, and to subsequently put them to work in intellectual contexts.

And then there are the more mundane factors that nonetheless serve as real impediments to learning: the lack of hardware, connectivity, and skills to partake in online learning on such platforms as Zoom, Google Meet, and Webex. These impediments are of course cohort-proof, meaning that they could easily be faced by fresh school leavers as by working-adults learners. Still, again, the latter cohort is more likely to have the means, experience, and social support to quickly remedy the situation.

To find out how the student-participants fared in the areas identified above, two instruments in the form of questionnaires were distributed by email and Whatsapp. Both were based on the five-point Likert scale. The first instrument was the Learner Personality Profile, while the second was the Assessment of Online Learning Skills. The first instrument, namely the Learner Personality Profile, measured nine constructs, although only the first two served as the primary foci of this research: (1) motivation; (2) emotional stability; (3) openness; (4) self-efficacy; (5) adaptability; (6) accountability; (7) self-directedness; (8) cross-cultural competence; and (9) resilience. By contrast, the second instrument, the Assessment of Online Learning Skills

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questionnaire measured three constructs: (1) study skills; (2) literacy skills; and (3) living skills.

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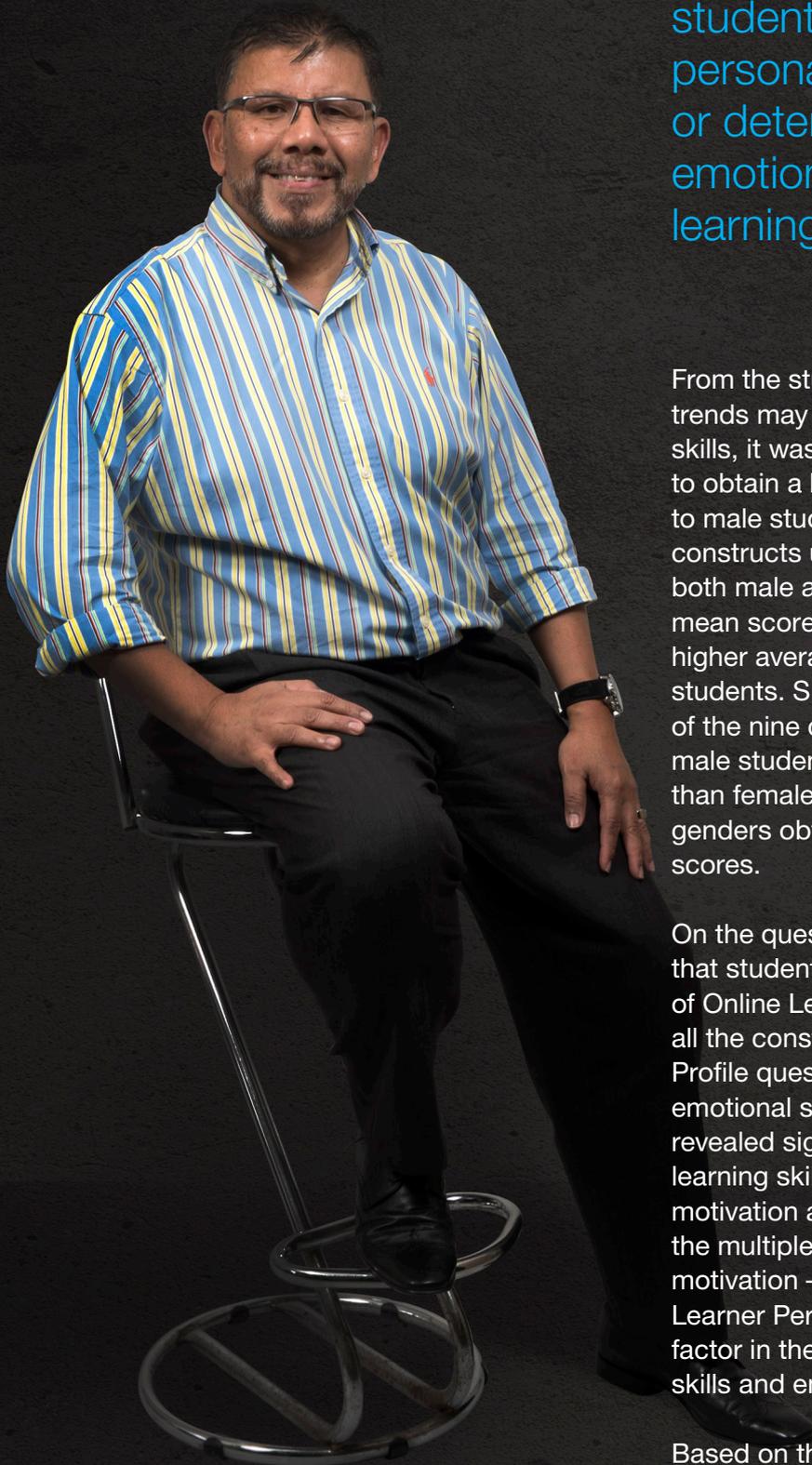
To what extent will these students' learning skills and personality profiles shape or determine their level of emotional equanimity and online learning success?

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From the student-participants' responses, several trends may be observed. With regard to study skills, it was found that female students tended to obtain a higher mean score as compared to male students. As for all but one of the nine constructs under Learner Personality Profile, both male and female students obtained average mean scores, although female students reported a higher average mean score as compared to male students. Significantly, bucking the trend, for one of the nine constructs, namely emotional stability, male students reported a higher mean score than female students, although, in the end, both genders obtained low, rather than average, mean scores.

On the question of correlation, the data suggests that students who scored high in the Assessment of Online Learning Skills tended to score high in all the constructs under the Learner Personality Profile questionnaire, with the exception of emotional stability. Correlation analyses also revealed significant relationships between online learning skills and emotional stability, and between motivation and emotional stability. Interestingly, the multiple-regression analyses reported that motivation – as one of the nine constructs under Learner Personality Profile – was not a mediating factor in the relationship between online learning skills and emotional stability.

Based on the research findings, five recommendations may be made. First, the



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university needs to address educational equity by ensuring that its students are able to access online learning. More specifically, it should ensure that all students receive the appropriate and effective learning opportunities, instructional resources, and evaluative assessment – all of which ought to be differentiated according to their unique sets of characteristics and needs. Second, the university needs to look into students' readiness to engage in online learning for the study has shown that they generally struggled with the lack of knowledge and skills required to participate productively. Third, the university should consider setting up a centre for student learning to assist students having difficulties with online study skills. Fourth, the university ought to consider beefing up its counselling and guidance services, and other targeted intervention programmes to help students facing emotional issues such as stress and depression. Fifth, and lastly, the university needs to ensure that its online tutors are well trained in the online learning system and in online learning competency. Apart from having technological knowledge, online tutors also need to be sensitised to the importance of being student-friendly and having good communication and coaching skills.

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In conclusion, the research highlighted here is but one endeavour amongst many to better understand the factors behind online learning success during these pandemic times. It focused on a particular cohort in a particular time and place but its findings may serve nonetheless as metaphorical grass to chew on, if only to see if they may apply to the particular cohorts under our care. More research along these lines are bound to emerge in the near future so it remains to be seen if the findings highlighted in this short piece

will be replicated and to what extent, and if the same interventionist measures recommended will not be reiterated. Suffice it to conclude for now that, just as there are challenges before us as online facilitators and pastoral caregivers, there are also measures at our disposal to make teaching-learning at least a little less stressful and a little more productive.

* This essay is culled from the research article that is forthcoming in the ASEAN Journal of Open and Distance Learning (AJODL). 

feature

En Bloc Credit Transfer Scheme

Five-Minutes with Prof Dr Siti Aishah Hashim Ali, Registrar & Acting General Manager (Operations and Learner Experience)

By Dr David Lim

Dr David Lim (DL): OUM recently introduced the “En Bloc Credit Transfer Scheme”. Please can you tell us about the scheme?

Prof Dr Siti Aishah (SA): The “En Bloc Credit Transfer Scheme” was introduced to help learners transfer the maximum number of credits allowable by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency [MQA].

DL: How is this scheme different from the conventional credit transfer scheme? Is it open to all learners, including non-OUM graduates?

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Three key benefits immediately come to mind.

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SA: Previously, learners had to apply for credit transfer for each of the subjects they had taken. That process tended to be laborious. Now, with the “En Bloc Credit Transfer Scheme”, OUM alumni who continue their studies with us will, upon entry to their respective programmes, automatically be given the maximum number of credits to transfer. The process happens in one go, without the learners needing to put in an application. Non-alumni learners, too, qualify for en bloc credit transfer if they apply and furnish all the required documents for the university’s once-off evaluation.

DL: How will qualified candidates benefit from the scheme?

SA: Three key benefits immediately come to mind. The first and most apparent is the convenience of en bloc credit transfer. It takes place one time and is settled once and for all upon entry. The second benefit is financial in nature. With en bloc credit transfer, learners stand to benefit from substantial savings in fees as they will need to pay for fewer credits than they would have had to otherwise. Conditionally, learners may be able to transfer up to 50 per cent of their credits into a higher-level programme. That’s how much less learners will need to pay for furthering their studies with us. Third, with the en bloc credit transfer scheme, learners will benefit from having the duration of their study shortened proportionately.

DL: Thank you for sharing, Prof Siti. 



photo by Razif Masri