

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ONLINE LEARNING: CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 forced the government to stop offline or face-to-face learning and implement online learning. Online learning is a new learning style for most students. This study investigates the challenges of online learning faced by students at a faculty of education in South Sulawesi. In particular, this research focuses on the types of challenges faced by students and how they overcome these challenges. This study uses a qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews via telephone calls, WhatsApp applications, and virtual zoom applications to collect data from 30 students at one campus in South Sulawesi. The findings of this study indicate that the challenges faced by students are largely influenced by digital knowledge and skills, economic background, place of residence, and the teaching style of lecturers. This study concludes that online learning is less effective in increasing student participation, activeness, and providing quality learning.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an education crisis in Indonesia. Many educational institutions, including campuses, have been forced to stop face-to-face teaching and learning activities and instead choose online teaching and learning activities (Rahiem, 2020; Lase et al., 2021). The entire learning process is transferred to the LMS (Learning Management System). Most courses that rely on process-based learning activities, such as courses conducted in the lab, must also be conducted online. The sudden shift from offline learning to online learning raises concerns because it will have a major impact on the world of education and students' abilities in the future (Li & Lalani, 2020).

Nothing has changed, books and knowledge have remained the same, but the style of education has changed. Before the pandemic, learning activities were carried out with an offline system where messages from lecturers were delivered directly to students. However, digital technology has become an alternative means of conveying messages and information remotely with the help of online applications. There are many benefits of online learning, such as: motivating students and providing self-confidence (Aboderin, 2015; Li & Lalani, 2020), increasing the effectiveness of the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic (Galván Casas et al., 2020), and being able to reach students from faraway places to participate in learning through various LMS features

such as chat rooms, video communication, and various other features (Andayani & Larasati, 2019; Li & Lalani, 2020). The teaching and learning process can be carried out anytime and anywhere, even from a long distance by only relying on the internet network. But in fact, in online learning, students tend to face several challenges. This is evidenced by the results of interviews with several students at one of the education faculties in South Sulawesi on August 10, 2021, who revealed that they faced several challenges such as a lack of understanding of LMS applications, inadequate internet networks, and expensive internet quota packages. There are several challenges that can affect student participation in online learning, such as the use of teaching materials, student interaction, and the learning atmosphere (Simamora, 2020; Roberts & Mc Innerney, 2007).

In addition, other factors can be related to the campus and the personal support of the student. Factors related to campus support that can affect student participation in online learning include (1) availability and quality of campus infrastructure and resources; (2) campus technical support for students; and (3) preparation of lecturers and students for style change learning (Gulatee et al., 2008; Andrianto et al., 2019). Meanwhile, factors related to student personality include student knowledge and skills, economic background, place of residence, and learning style (Ippakayala & El-Ocla, 2017; Nay et al., 2021; Shahmoradi et al., 2018; Manzor & Ramzan, 2020; Wiratman et al., 2021). Aside from students, lecturers can also have an impact on student participation in the learning process. This is due to the lecturer's failure to explain and demonstrate some learning concepts or to design learning so that students have a real classroom experience (Lu et al., 2020). This situation is sometimes caused by knowledge, skills, and courses that are not in accordance with the online learning system (Karalis, 2020).

Online learning has now become the best option in the COVID-19 pandemic situation. As the literature shows, online learning promises many benefits, some of which may be the best solution to longstanding educational problems. However, shifting teaching and learning activities to an online system without preparation will pose several new challenges for lecturers and students. Thus, this study aims to explore students' experiences in online learning, find out the challenges they face, and how they deal with these challenges.

2. METHOD

The qualitative approach used in this study is influenced by the constructivist paradigm. According to this paradigm, people's views of the world are often influenced by their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Someone who has had a meaningful experience will use that experience to interpret life and the phenomena they encounter (Thorne, 2000). Qualitative methods, particularly interviews and focus group discussions, enable people who participate in a study to express their opinions and beliefs about their reality.

The population of this research is undergraduate program students in one of the faculties of education in South Sulawesi. In selecting the sample, student information such

as their geographic location and willingness to participate was taken into account. The sample selection was intended to involve students from rural areas where electricity and internet infrastructure are still inadequate and unstable, as well as suburban and urban areas where electricity and internet infrastructure are very supportive. Thus, the sample obtained is as many as 30 people. Semi-structured interviews via telephone calls or WhatsApp as a data collection method. These interviews lasted from 15 minutes to 20 minutes and were recorded using a cell phone. The data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis, as recommended by [Vaismoradi et al. \(2016\)](#). The model has four stages, namely, initialization, construction, rectification, and finalization. The results of this analysis are presented and supported by quotes from the responses of students who acted as respondents.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students face various challenges in online learning caused by several factors, such as digital knowledge and skills, economic background, place of residence, and the teaching style of lecturers.

3.1 Digital Knowledge and Skills

The following are the opinions of respondents about their digital knowledge and skills in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondent 1 said:

"I don't understand how to use applications that lecturers use when teaching."

This opinion was supported by several other respondents who said,

"I don't know how to operate online learning applications smoothly, even though last semester there was an introductory computer course, but what I learned was only about getting to know computer parts and their functions. What we really need right now is to learn how to use online applications for online learning."

In contrast to Respondent 3, who said that:

"I can operate online applications, but I don't know how to edit videos, while during online learning, many lecturers give the task of making a video."

In addition, respondent 4 said that:

"I can operate an online learning application that is usually used by lecturers, but when an error occurs because of a problem with the application or the connection, I don't know what to do if I can fix the connection but the application can't."

Respondents in this study indicated that one of their main challenges in online learning is the limited knowledge and skills they have about digital devices and operating online learning applications. The knowledge they have does not support them in operating the LMS and doing their job effectively. Respondents have received introductory computer courses. However, these courses are no longer relevant to the current situation because the introductory computer courses only discuss getting to know computer parts and their functions, while the skills needed during this pandemic are the skills to operate applications and online platforms that support online learning. Limited knowledge and skills affect respondents' motivation so that they are lazy to attend lectures and lazy to do assignments ([Ippakayala & El-Ocla, 2017](#); [Bella & Ratna, 2018](#)). This is supported by research ([Yilmaz et al., 2017](#)), which states that one of the

internal factors that make students lazy to take part in learning is the lack of digital skills they have. In his research (Asyrofuddin et al., 2021), he revealed that online learning will not be effective if the digital knowledge and skills possessed are limited.

One of the ways the campus supports students in the online learning process is to provide a guidebook for using the LMS, which is often used by lecturers. The manual helps lecturers and students prepare and implement the learning process. The manual also contains guidelines for using LMS applications. However, the book only explains how to access and use the functions of the general features of the application, so it does not give students the opportunity to get hands-on experience. This makes students feel stuttered when faced with problems or errors in the application. It was also expressed by Mulawarman (2020) in his research that students need all day to learn and overcome the problems experienced in the use of online learning applications. Even though the respondents experienced challenges in terms of digital knowledge and skills, they were able to overcome them gradually by learning things they did not know through YouTube and the instructions given by the lecturers.

3.2 Economic Background

In addition to knowledge and skills, students also have challenges with their family's economy. Like one of the opinions of the following 5 respondents who discuss digital devices:

"It takes me longer to submit assignments because I only use my phone to do my homework." Whereas in the past, this was not a problem because there were many college friends who had laptops and there were computer rental services near campus".

In addition, respondent 6 and several other respondents also discussed internet quotas by saying:

"During this COVID-19 pandemic, my internet quota consumption has increased." To participate in online learning, I spent Rp. 100 thousand to Rp. 150 thousand in one month. Even though the income of parents does not increase but tends to decrease, Indeed, there is a quota subsidy from the campus, but the subsidy was received late, so I had to buy it myself at the beginning of the lecture".

Student participation in online learning is also influenced by economic factors such as digital devices, internet quotas, and special rooms for study. There are several students who are affected because of these factors; they do not have digital devices such as laptops, are constrained by the cost of buying internet quotas, and there is no special room for studying. They explained that when they need a laptop device, they usually rely on the laptops of fellow students, and relatives, or use computer rental services around campus. However, because learning is carried out online and students are required to study from their homes, it is difficult for some students to get laptop devices because during this pandemic we are required to always keep our distance.

The shift from offline learning to online learning has a huge impact on the use of information and communication technology so technology continues to develop. The development of technology, information, and communication has an impact on increasing internet consumption (Hariyadi, 2021; Sulasmi et al., 2020; Miko et al.,

2021). Online learning causes students' internet quota usage to increase. Some students have no problems in this regard, but others have complained about the increase in internet quota costs, while family income is steady and tends to decrease during the COVID-19 pandemic. One form of campus support is providing internet quota subsidies to students. However, the subsidy was not received on time, so they had to buy their own internet quota first to be able to take part in the online learning process. This condition is in accordance with research (Bahasoan et al., 2020), which says that online learning is learning that requires greater cost than offline learning.

3.3 Residence

During the current pandemic, students are required to study from home through online learning, but this online learning poses several challenges for students. As stated by respondent 3 below:

"I live in a rural area where the internet network is not stable".

This opinion is supported by respondent 6 and several other respondents who said,

"Online learning is very difficult for me because I have to go up the mountain to get a network so I can take classes. Besides that, there is no electricity on the mountain to charge my laptop."

While respondent 2 said that:

"The area where I live doesn't have an internet network, so every morning I have to leave the area where I live to look for an internet network to attend lectures or just find out what assignments the lecturer has given me." Once I found out, I would go home to work on the assignment and come back the next day to collect it and see the new assignment".

Unlike the others, some respondents claimed that they were not affected by the internet network and their area of residence.

"Alhamdulillah, the internet network where I live is stable, so it's not a problem to take online lessons."

Some respondents also discussed a special room for learning, as said by respondent 7 below.

"I live with my parents and siblings. When I was studying at home, my brother used to play around where I was studying, it interfered with my concentration. Besides that, my mother often comes in the middle of the learning process and assigns me homework such as buying sugar, salt, or soy sauce at the stalls around the house or even helping to pick something up in the garden".

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students are required to study online from their respective homes. Because of these circumstances, students are dispersed throughout the city; some are in urban areas with adequate internet access, while others are on the outskirts of the city or even in rural areas where internet access is less conducive to learning. Students who live in urban areas, feel that they are not affected, but most of the students on this campus come from rural areas, so they think that online learning is less effective. This is because the internet network in their area is inadequate. Whereas the internet network is an important element for those who are involved in online

learning, this is supported by research (Barrot et al., 2021), which states that online learning will be effective if it is supported by adequate facilities and infrastructure. However, over time, students can overcome these challenges by looking for higher places such as hills or mountains to be able to access the internet well and fully charge their laptops before leaving.

In addition to the geographical conditions of residence, the learning environment is also one of the factors that affect the online learning process. The learning environment has an important role in the learning process to provide a sense of comfort and motivate students to achieve better learning outcomes (Dhawan 2020; Buchari 2018; Hargreaves 2005). The most common place to participate in the online learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic is at home. Several respondents explained that studying from home was difficult for them because they could not have a special room to study. Respondents revealed that they frequently face more challenges when studying at home than when studying on campuses, such as noise, limited space, and facilities. In addition, respondents also admitted that they did not have time to read books. This is because when they are at home, respondents are expected to participate in household chores. This is consistent with the research (Kwatubana & Ebrahim 2020), which revealed that students' social responsibilities such as homework during online learning negatively affect how they learn. Respondents revealed that they faced these challenges in several ways. For example, to do paper assignments, those who did not have a laptop device would use their cellphones and use the WPS Office application and choose a time in the evening when there was no more homework.

3.4 Lecturer Teaching Style

Online learning and offline or classical learning are certainly different, both in terms of methods and teaching styles used by lecturers. In online learning during the current pandemic, the teaching style of lecturers is also a challenge that must be faced by students. In the opinion of respondent 1 below:

"There are lecturers who don't explain the lecture material, who only give us assignments without explanation." Even though the material is difficult to understand".

Respondent 1's opinion was supported by several other respondents who said that:

"Most of the lecturers only provide their teaching materials through LMS, and if there are questions, they are submitted through the comments column. In our opinion, this is less effective".

Some respondents also expressed the opinion that:

"Lecturers who teach with the lecture method alone are less effective without reciprocal activity from us students."

The opinion of the respondent above is supported by the opinion of respondent 7, who said:

"When learning is carried out offline, we do not only discuss directly in one class but even between classes." On-campus, we naturally have groups to discuss face-to-face a theory, model, or concept. For some students, lecture-based learning alone is not

enough. We benefited significantly from hands-on discussions and remained motivated to learn".

The respondents in this study also faced challenges related to the teaching style of the lecturers. They explained that there were several lecturers who presented learning materials online but did not provide them with any classroom experience. They revealed that lecturers only use LMS to give assignments to students without giving clear instructions about the assignments. LMS is just a means of sending and collecting assignments (Aspelin, 2020). The teaching style is very influential on students' motivation and understanding during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aspelin, 2020). Lecturers who fail to explain and demonstrate a concept and process to students will be a new challenge that students must face (Lu et al., 2020; Rachmiati, 2016; Danial et al., 2021). Despite experiencing these challenges, respondents were able to overcome them by searching for additional information through the Google search engine and confirming with the lecturer concerned via WhatsApp chat or WhatsApp calls.

4. CONCLUSION

There are four aspects that become challenges for students during online learning, namely, digital knowledge and skills; economic background; place of residence; and the teaching style of lecturers. This study concludes that online learning is less effective if the government or the campus ignores these four aspects, which will affect teaching and learning. Instead of being a solution to learning problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has created new problems for students. However, online learning, which creates new problems, is an opportunity for campuses to learn from their experiences and prepare themselves better to face other disasters after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the campus should improve its online learning so that it can easily adapt to disasters and crises in the future.

This study recommends all educational institutions think deeply and plan thoroughly about online learning before making a decision to implement online learning. The government and universities should not see online learning as a panacea to cure the education crisis with poor planning. When thinking about online learning, all aspects related to the learning process must be considered, such as the human aspect (lecturers and students), study spaces (their availability and suitability for learning), and learning materials and strategies (courses that can enhance digital skills to support online learning). Above all these aspects, in planning, the government and campuses should see online learning as a strategy used to improve the quality of learning and to achieve educational goals, not as an alternative to it. In this way, online learning can effectively serve as a panacea in times of crisis.

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