

Factors Affecting Poor Performance Among First Year Medical Students: A Qualitative Survey

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: First Year MBBS students usually face a difficult time adjusting to the tough medical curriculum even without the pandemic. Recently in the University of Cyberjaya, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students performing poorly at the recent Year 1 end of course examinations.

Objective(s): The aim of this study is to understand the reasons for poor performance during the end of course examinations among Year 1 MBBS students.

Methodologies: This research utilises a qualitative survey design. All students Year 1 MBBS students with Probation 1 status took part in the survey.

Results: A total of 12 students took part in this study. Almost all students involved agreed that not being able to attend face-to-face teaching and go to campus affected their studies. Analysis showed that the factors for poor performance in this study can be concluded into 4 overarching themes; 1) Personal factors, 2) Environmental factors, 3) Teaching methodology/ faculty factors and 4) Social Factors.

Conclusion: This study confirms that the lockdown imposed to control the pandemic affected students' performance through personal, environmental, teaching methodology/faculty and social challenges. Although the pandemic is now officially over, there is a need for further studies to develop resilience in students to prevent major adverse events to affect their performance in the future.

Keywords: pandemic; medical students; academic performance

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world in many aspects essentially with regards to business, education, health and tourism industries (Pragolapathi, 2020). In order to control the spread of the disease, governments across the globe had to implement restrictions including travel bans, social distancing, self-isolations, curfews and lockdowns (Gostin & Wiley, 2020). This has directly or indirectly impacted on the education system at all levels including medical schools. Most universities worldwide had to either postpone their academic activities or transfer them to online based education in order to minimize contact and reduce transmission of the virus. These actions unfortunately has led to many repercussions to both the university and students (Nicola et. al., 2020).

Several issues related to online teaching learning has been studied in various institutions. Whilst students seem to agree with the benefits of online teaching, namely the

ability to learn at their own pace, decreased time spent on commuting and more flexible learning experience, most students still feel that there are more disadvantages to online learning. (Dost et al., 2020). Students reportedly agreed that online teaching learning activities lack in terms of the quality of education, are less engaging, more distractions being at home and technical difficulties. (Dost et al., 2020). Additionally, many studies continue to report on the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of students (Zis et. al., 2021). Although many studies focused on the challenges related to online teaching learning, very few studied the impact on academic performance of the students.

The COVID-19 pandemic required the medical schools to quickly change and adapt from face-to-face teaching to online (Rose S., 2020). For first year medical students, they usually have a difficult time adjusting to the tough medical curriculum even without the pandemic. Adjusting to online learning on top of going through their

first year as medical students would certainly be an added challenge for them in their studies (Slivkof et. al., 2021). Recently in the University of Cyberjaya, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students performing poorly at the recent Year 1 end of course examinations. The aim of this study is to understand the reasons for poor performance during the end of course examinations among Year 1 MBBS students and how to remedy the situation.

METHODOLOGIES

Study design

This research utilises a qualitative survey design. This design has been chosen since it is the best method to answer the research question.

Participants

All students Year 1 MBBS students with Probation 1 status took part in the survey.

Data collection

Two focus group discussions (FGD) have been conducted. Each FGD consisted of 5 to 6 students and were held using an online medium. An independent researcher with no affiliation to the university conducted the discussions. Each FGD lasted about 1 to 1.5 hours and were audio recorded. Each recording was then reviewed, and

conversations transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then analysed using thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 12 students who performed poorly during their Year 1 End of Course examinations took part in the survey. Among them 4 were male and 8 were female. There were 2 international students and 10 local students.

Impact of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on studies

Almost all students involved agreed that not being able to attend face-to-face teaching and go to campus affected their studies. They reported a number of problems related to the MCO (Figure 1). Hence, when the MCO ended and they were able to attend classes at the campus, these problems were resolved. However, a few students had problems were not related to the MCO such as culture shock and personal problems. These problems continued even after the MCO.

Factors affecting poor performance

Analysis showed that the factors for poor performance in this study can be concluded into 4 overarching themes; 1) Personal factors, 2) Environmental factors, 3) Teaching methodology/ faculty factors and 4) Social Factors. The factors are summarized in the following table (Table 1):



Figure 1: Problems related to studies during the MCO period

Table 1: Factors leading to poor performance

Personal Factors	Environmental Factors	Teaching methodology/ faculty factors	Social Factors
1. Poor study skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> studies alone, not adapted to student centred learning, poor time management, lack of discipline, does not ask for help, cramming before exams 	1. Internet problems	1. Difficulties with online learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching method not effective Examination very anxiety provoking since worry about internet stability, having to switch camera on 	1. Online learning from the start <ul style="list-style-type: none"> were not able to make friends from the same course felt isolated and unmotivated
2. Having personal problems	2. Home environment not conducive for studying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sharing room, no proper place to study This also leads to stress 	2. Has problem with a specific lecturer in a specific course <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not understand the lecturer teaching and when asked for help the lecturer did not respond 	2. Due to lockdown and hence closure of campus, did not meet mentors in person <ul style="list-style-type: none"> felt awkward and uncomfortable to ask for help
3. Poor motivation	3. Distraction in the form of gadgets, people or responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some students had to look after their grandparents since they were at home 		3. Culture shock
	4. Time difference (international students) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have to wake up at odd hours for classes 		

The transition to online learning was a challenging change that had to be adapted by students in a short timeframe. Many students are struggling with various of distractions online and at home and having a non-conducive learning environment. Without a specific study space and distracted by other house-hold activities that is interfering with their study habit, so they tend to lose focus and motivation to learn (Donaldson-Pressman et. al., 2014). Other than that poor connectivity has been a major disadvantage in online learning (Naziva 2020; Radu et; al., 2020) as experience by the students in this study too. A study that was conducted by Hassan (2020) on students’ perception on online learning revealed that some students were having difficulties adapting to online learning due to lack of appropriate facilities, materials to aid the learning process and lack of support from their lecturer and peers. Not to mentioned that some lectures were too didactic with minimum engagement between the students and lecturers that makes the learning less motivating (Naziva 2020; Radu et; al., 2020).

Several studies had showed that online learning for students during lockdown periods were associated with significantly reduced social interactions and poor motivation. Similar like the findings in this study, where the students are less interacting with their peers and having no friends. Less social interactions as well as personal problems could leads to poor motivation. A regression analyses also revealed that stress and fatigue were significant predictors of poor academic performance

(Radu et. al., 2020). Thus, all these cumulating problems with poor study skills could add up to stress and fatigue as well as to the extent of burnt-out and thereby affecting their studies and academic performance. Nonetheless some of the factors are more towards students’ interpersonal skills especially to communicate with their lecturers or mentors and also with their peers as well as adapting to the medical curriculum in University of Cyberjaya.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the lockdown imposed to control the pandemic affected students’ performance through personal, environmental, teaching methodology/faculty and social challenges. Although the pandemic is now officially over, there is a need for further studies to develop resilience in students to prevent major adverse events to affect their performance in the future.

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