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Table of Contents

1.	A Brief Analysis of Materials and Techniques Used in Yichun Carving1
2.	A Study of How Internationalisation Affects the Green Promotion in the Beauty
	Industry in Indonesia
3.	A Study on the Influence of Customers' Revisit Intention Towards Street Food in
	Penang24
4.	A Study on the Readiness of Customer Towards Service Robots in Restaurants39
5.	Aesthetic Education and Personality Cultivation Among College Students
6.	Community-Based Health Insurance: A Comprehensive Review of Literature and
	Lessons for Future Development
7.	Conceptualizing Online Impulse Buying of Celebrity-Owned Brands on Live Streaming
8.	Cross-Sectional Research on Customers' Attitude Towards Online Food Delivery
•	(OFD) Services After the COVID-19 Pandemic in Klang Valley
9	Customer Purchase Decision for Mixue Ice Cream & Tea: Role of Product, Price, Place
•	E-WOM
1 / 1	Destination Food Image Among Tourists: A Study of Mamak Stalls in Penang97
	Determinants of Innovation in UAE Project-based Firms
	Do Streamers' Personal Characteristics Affect Consumers' Purchase Desire in Live-
14.	
	Streaming E-Commerce? An Empirical Study on Streamers' Live-Streaming Process
12	
13.	Examining Lecturers' Perceptions on the Interplay between Artificial Intelligence and
11	the Sustainable Development Goals
14.	Explore the Application of Ink Painting in Animation from the Perspective of Chinese
4 =	Painting
15.	Exploring the Challenges During Internships After MCO in Malaysia: A Study among
	University Student in Hospitality Sector
16.	Exploring the Factors That Influence Plagiarism in Higher Education: A Study among
	School of Information Science Students in Sarawak
17.	Factors Affecting Repurchase Intention: Price, eWOM, and Brand Image - A PT. Lion
	Mentari Airlines Perspective
18.	Green Human Resource Management for Balanced Sustainability in Performance: A
	Case of Manufacturing SME in Jiangxi Province, China
	Gross Margin and Profitability Analyzes of Shallot Farming
20.	How Brand Ambassador and Social Media Marketing of Luxury Brand Affect
	Purchase Intention of Generation Z In Jakarta211
21.	Institutionalisation of Sustainability Initiatives: A Case Study of an Award-winning
	Malaysian Palm Oil Plantation Company226
22.	Islamic Communication Model Implementation in Teaching and Learning Approach
	239
23.	"Kurikulum Merdeka" to Create an Inclusive Learning Environment244
24.	Leveraging ICT for Language Testing at the University of Foreign Language Studies,
	the University of Danang, Vietnam: Insights and Recommendations257
25.	Mediators Factors Influence on Consumers' Intention to Choose Green Resorts 265



26	. Micro-takaful Adoption: Application of Perceived Characteristics of Innovation (PCI)
	Theory282
27	Occupational Pressure Among District Health Office Staff
28	Online Learning and Assessments in the Higher Education after the Pandemic: Stay or
	Scrap?
29.	Perspectives of Students at Institutions of Higher Education Toward Open Distance
	Learning317
30.	Purchase Intention Towards Sustainable Marketing in Fast Fashion Industry: A Gen Z
	Women's Perspective in Indonesia327
31.	Research on the Current Status and Countermeasures of Cross-border E-commerce
	Development of Agricultural Products in Shandong Province
32.	Revitalising Packaging Design of Children Food Brand for Marketing Strategy in
	China344
33.	Study on the Effects of Brand Strategy on Organizational Performance in Chinese
	Down Coat Brands
34.	The Application of Animation Expression Design for Social Media of China 360
	The Application Of Chinese Heritage Fei Tian Art Characters On Textile Scarf Design
36.	The Effect of Blog-integrated Writing Instruction on Enhancing Writing Performance
	and Writing Motivation
37.	The Effect of Product Innovation on Purchase Intention in MSMEs Culinary Industry
•	with Gen Z Segmentation
38.	The Effects of Aromatherapy on the Sleep Quality of Adults with Insomnia: A
.	Systematic Review
39.	The Essence of Psychometric Assessment: The Postures for Effective Assessment at a
٠,٠	Case
40	The Impact of Brand Image, Brand Awareness, and Consumer Ethnocentrism on the
70.	Purchase Intention of Youth for Local Footwear Brands in Bandung440
41	The Impact of e-learning on Basketball Sport Education: A Comparative Study of
11.	Undergraduate Student in Shangrao Normal University
42	The Impact of Multicultural Education on University Students Well Being in China469
43	The Implication of 19th Century Colonial Facade Characteristics on Residence Design
70.	in Tianjin, China
44	The Importance of Short Video Technology Usage on Student Learning Engagement
77.	
45	The Influence of eWOM, Perceived Value and, Trust towards Purchase Decision of
75.	Airbnb in Indonesia509
16	The Influence of Supply Chain Financing on Enterprise Operation Efficiency and
70.	
47	Competitiveness
4/.	
40	Cultural Tourism Participation: A Study in Politeknik METrO Betong Sarawak 531 The Rise of Second-hand in Indonesia: Customer Preference Between Pre-owned
40.	
40	Luxury Bag and Brand New Luxury Bag
4 7 .	The Role of Motivation and Internal Factors in Entrepreneurial Intentions Among
	Students in Guangdong Higher Vocational Colleges



	Thematic Review on Mobile Health Applications in Design Perspective Publications
	from 2018-2023: Analysis of Trends for Future Studies
51.	Transformational Leadership Influence on Employee Performance: A Proposed Study
	Among Palestinian Central Municipalities Employees584
52.	Unveiling Leadership's Impact on Employee Performance and Turnover at XYZ
	Restaurant 597
	Kerangka Konsep Keseimbangan Kerja Kehidupan Berasaskan Maqasid Syariah ke
	Arah Kesejahteraan Sosial Universiti Awam Malaysia
	Pemikiran Umar, M. S. Dalam Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan: Satu Penilaian Terhadap Ayat-
	Ayat Sifat



Online Learning and Assessments in the Higher Education after the Pandemic: Stay or Scrap?

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Abstract: All higher education institutions have moved to online mode due to the movement restrictions in the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, but many academicians were under-prepared. Now that the movement restrictions have been lifted, it's time to reflect on these teaching practices and consider their suitability and continuance use in this post-pandemic era. This study used a case study approach and examined blended and hybrid learning and online assessments and their suitability in the post-pandemic era. It adopted a crowdsourcing approach to gather the relevant literature and was backed by the reflection and experience of the academicians in a branch campus of an Australian university in Malaysia. This study suggests that academicians could still use blended and hybrid learning where needed, but they must upskill themselves. Furthermore, selective online assessments could still be used. This study would be helpful to academicians and policymakers in higher education when deciding the teaching mode and assessments in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: Hybrid learning, online learning, online assessments, higher education, post-pandemic

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 and the movement restrictions imposed by many governments worldwide have forced all higher education institutions (HEIs) to shift the course delivery platform to the online mode. The alternatives to the traditional teaching methods, such as online learning, hybrid learning, and blended learning, as well as the various online assessments, were deployed to sustain the course delivery. In many ways, the pandemic accelerated the use and adoption of technology, as academics had to find a means to reconnect with learners in their own homes. Although a shift from physical to online mode is inevitable, inadequate preparation on both the academics and the students has posed many challenges (Fung et al., 2022). Three years have passed and many countries have opened up their borders and relaxed the movement restrictions. However, some HEIs still maintain certain, if not all, methods of course delivery. As HEIs welcomed students back to campus, some students could not return due to various administrative and home country policy restrictions on labour movements due to health concerns during the post-pandemic cooldown period. Some HEIs had to transition their return to normalcy through use of 'hybrid' teaching to cater to different learners needs. In fact, many HEIs in this time had adopted teaching modes and content deliveries catered to flexible and accessible classrooms to meet the students



Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

wherever (in the physical classroom or in the virtual classroom) and whenever they need to be engaged (through both synchronous and asynchronous delivery) (Gamage et al., 2023). Given the vast experience handling online delivery as well as designing online assessments, it is time to reflect and relook at the suitability of these teaching mode and practices now. Moving forward, we need to better manage our teaching quality by maintaining or improving the current online modes of course delivery.

This study, using a case study approach based on the literature and reflection of the academicians' experience in an Australian branch campus in Malaysia, explore the effects of the teaching practices during the pandemic, retrospectively, and consider the suitability of these practices in the post-pandemic era. The aim is to determine suitable online teaching practices and assessments that could be beneficial and more inclusive, subject to further improvements, to the students in the higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hybrid Learning

In the face of the pervasive challenges posed by the pandemic, many institutions of higher learning showed considerable adaptability by implementing hybrid delivery to ensure smooth academic progress of the students. Hybrid learning (Raes et al., 2020) is a form of delivery that occurs in a physical place but with students accessing the learning on both face-to-face and online. The hybrid learning allows the institution to maintain educational continuity while prioritising student and staff health and well-being (Müller et al., 2021). Remote students were able to engage with the curriculum by attending scheduled lectures online using the digital platform. Essentially, hybrid learning is a combination of online course delivery with face-to-face sessions simultaneously (Meydanlioglu & Arikan, 2014).

2.2 Blended Learning

Blended learning is a mode of delivery that contain a mixture of online and face-to-face delivery but mutually exclusive. As the name implied, blended learning blends both online and face-to-face delivery of a course (Hockly, 2018). The weightage of online and face-to-face elements varies. Institutions of higher learning can determine a mixture that best fit their students' profile and circumstances. Blended learning utilises computer-aided learning and collaborative learning to enrich student's learning experience (Dangwal, 2017). Hrastinski (2019) highlighted that blended learning could refer to a mode of delivery that combines different instructional methods, pedagogical approaches and technologies. Although some literature used the term blended and hybrid learning interchangeably, they are not exactly identical. They have both the online and face-to-face learning space but the content delivery is different. Blended learning deliveries the content either entirely online in certain components or topics or fully face-to-face. Hybrid learning, on the other hand, is the content delivery in both modes simultaneously.

2.2 Online Assessments

The pandemic has posed many challenges to educators, particularly in developing assessments in a non-traditional environment (Fung et al., 2022). Due to the pandemic restrictions, educators face the challenge of implementing assessments that should not only retain or enhance student engagement but also allow flexibility (e.g., time and place) for students to complete the



assessments. In some universities, the face-to-faced (F2F) invigilated exams at higher education has been replaced by formative assessment (FA). FA helps students to develop higher-order thinking and cognitive thinking, such as application and analysis, rather than recalling exam answers (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Often, the FA are situated in an online platform. In addition, FA offers students soft skills in line with workplace future professional practice (Woldeab & Brothen, 2019). The standing of soft skills identified amongst employers confirm that the shift to a knowledge emphasis on students' ability to communicate effectively throughout different channels (e.g., verbal (FA with presentation), written, non-verbal), on being self-effective, committed to results, building relationships with multiple co-workers and clients, and ability to be flexible to the external context (Hong et al., 2023; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Furthermore, FA provides the students with a more engaging experience with the lecturers that yields better results in terms of in-depth learning (Williams & Wong, 2009).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a case study approach to examine the effects of hybrid learning and online assessments since its implementation in 2020. A case study is an examination of a subject matter within real world context that could be descriptive, explanatory or exploratory (Yin, 2017). The present study is exploratory in nature and focused on the teaching practices within the School of Business of a foreign university branch campus in Malaysia from 2020 to 2022.

The data from this case study was crowdsourced by a team of academicians in the School of Business, led by the Head of School (HoS) to collect and analyse relevant literature published from 18 March, 2020 (i.e., the date of the lockdown in Malaysia) to 31 March, 2023. These literatures were extracted from the Scopus database as well as other news websites concerning the teaching and assessments development in the HEIs during this period. The academicians analysed these literatures, summarised and reported them separately in an Excel file. All academicians used these findings to reflect on their own experiences in teaching and designing assessments during the pandemic time and written them down. These write-ups were then further cross-checked by the HoS, who was not involved in the data collection process, to ensure its consistency with the articles found. This process, which demonstrates credibility (data from reliable sources), confirmability (i.e., cross-checking for consistency), and replicable (where the processes can be replicated) contributes to the reliability of the findings in this article (Guba, 1981; Lim et al., 2022).

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Benefits of Hybrid and Blended Learning (HBL)

One notable benefit of hybrid and blended teaching offered by the institution during the pandemic is the flexibility and accessibility it provides to students. With hybrid model, students may adjust their learning preferences based on their own circumstances, such as health problems or caregiving responsibilities. Combining face-to-face and online components at the same time, hybrid delivery allows students to select their preferred learning modality. Those who are returning to campus will have the option of attending a face-to-face lecture. Students who were unable to physically attend due to visa restrictions or other personal circumstances were able to participate remotely. This flexibility accommodates students' diverse schedules, learning preferences, and personal circumstances such as health issues, work obligations, or family responsibilities. Overall, the



hybrid mode demonstrates the institution's unwavering commitment to academic quality amid exceptional circumstances.

Benefits from the opportunity for real-time engagement between classmates for instances where they feel too tired to attend a class, but they still want to participate from home which can reduce cases of absence on a course. Whereas hybrid teaching can provide wider range of locations especially for international students without them having to relocate. At the same time, hybrid learning can offer those who primarily like to learn remotely with the option to participate in some of the social aspects of learning. Online learning comes with many freedoms. Those students who excel at self-management and independent learning will thrive under these freedoms: the freedom to learn from the location of their choosing and the freedom to develop an in-depth asynchronous discourse with students using the online components.

4.2 Drawbacks of Hybrid and Blended Learning (HBL)

While this innovative approach was instrumental in mitigating disruptions to the learning process, it is important to recognise the drawbacks. These includes a decreased availability of interactive and hands-on activities for remote learners. In this respect, the institution's implementation of the COVID-19 hybrid delivery served primarily as a coping mechanism rather than a proactive strategy. In the lack of a comprehensive Hybrid-Flexible, or HyFlex, classroom infrastructure, it wasn't easy to ensure that all modalities were provided equivalent learning opportunities. In some instances, it turned out that remote participants felt left out because their ability to actively partake in interactive activities or collaborative tasks was limited by the virtual environment. Such a challenge is common in online synchronous classes (Fung et al., 2022). Due to the lack of a Pan-Tilt-Zoom camera and the use of a fixed webcam spot, remote students occasionally were unable to view the illustrations on the whiteboard. In the interim, class time was taken up to for the setup of the hybrid delivery, especially when back-to-back sessions were running at the same venue. In the event where technical issues were not resolved in time, it prevented live streaming of the lecture. Online students ended up having to watch pre-recorded videos which could have hindered the interactive elements of learning. Further, it was noted that the instructor's use of face masks may have impacted the clarity of the audio during the live streaming of lecture.

Lecturer must always remember to communicate frequently and effectively by setting clear expectations for online students. They should also make available to answer any questions students may have or frequently asking the student questions. Whereas In the classroom setting, students still receive the real-time interaction, body language, and in-person engagement such as text, drawings and images as attention grabbers that lead to learning comprehension that can be crucial for learning but this is not applicable if the online students off their camera (Gunasekara et al., 2022).

A reflection of experiences during the pandemic suggested that before classes begin, lecturers need to familiarize with the tools, apps, learning technology and resources that would cause confusion and frustration to enhance the hybrid class. Some tools cannot be accessed and mastered from students which will hinder students from participation, interact no matter where they are, adding to class discussions and asking questions.



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Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

4.3 Improvements in Hybrid and Blended Learning in the Post-pandemic Era

The question of whether hybrid teaching should continue at the institution post pandemic is a complex one, as there are both possible benefits and drawbacks to consider. To decide whether or not to continue with hybrid teaching post the pandemic, the institution must weigh the advantages and disadvantages, as well as examining the particular needs of the community, the resources available to support such initiatives, and the potential long-term impact on teaching and learning outcomes.

On the one hand, hybrid delivery provides students with greater flexibility and accessibility, allowing them to engage in courses regardless of their location or personal circumstances. Particularly, hybrid learning can expand educational opportunities for students who might not otherwise have access to higher education due to financial or geographical barriers. This enhanced accessibility can help to create a more inclusive learning environment to promote educational equity. The hybrid model would also enable institutions to accommodate a wider range of student learning preferences, styles, and needs, which may contribute towards enhanced student outcomes and satisfaction. As described by Binnewies and Wang (2019), the purpose of the model is to provide the advantages of online mode, such as the flexibility to study anywhere one prefers (Bertram, 1999) and allowing students who have other obligations besides study to participate in a course (Robinson, 2005), while retaining the optional advantages of face-to-face instruction, such as immediate feedback and synchronous communication (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Vonderwell, 2003). It was also noted that the flexibility offered via hybrid model accommodates various learning styles and strategies of learners, and gave them greater control over their own education (Binnewies & Wang, 2019).

On the other hand, the identified challenges, which includes technological infrastructure and digital literacy, and student engagement may impede the successful implementation of hybrid teaching. Hence, any endeavour to continue with hybrid delivery should be supported by proper technical and pedagogical training, appropriate technology, and digital education support (Binnewies & Wang, 2019). Specifically, hybrid delivery requires a lot of mental effort from the instructor since they have to think about the content, the delivery, the audience, what they want to say, how they want to say it, whether or not they are being inclusive, and so on (Detyna et al., 2023). A simultaneous online and face-to-face delivery is possible, but it would be challenging to deliver and would entail technical hurdles. Hence, the design, setup, and implementation of a hybrid learning environment require significant thought from the instructors.

There are many benefits of face-to-face format in the hybrid learning; this teaching modality provides in-person, real time interaction between faculty-students and student-students, which in turn can spark innovative questions and conversations. Students have an opportunity to seek clarification or response to their questions in their classroom (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Students who value face-to-face instruction, in-person class discussions, and organic bonding between faculty and students may not enjoy online learning (Roval & Jordan, 2004). It will be hard for them to shun face-to-face learning activities and sit in front of computers to complete the work. There is an increasing body of evidence that suggests that in-person learning provides motivation, helps in building a sense of community, and provides much needed encouragement to students. This also allows instructors to pick up on nonverbal cues and make appropriate changes in the content and teaching methodology (Kemp & Grieve, 2014; Paul & Jefferson, 2019)



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Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The research found that the challenges could be primarily due to a lack of self-regulatory behavior with the online components of hybrid learning (Muhria, 2023). However, students seemed to appreciate constant reminders to remind students to attempt the weekly tasks and online quizzes. By allowing students to communicate with the academician online or face-to-face, or by email, whichever students prefer, students would feel that they are supported. Exercising empathy by spreading the assignment and various assessment submission deadlines to ensure students can cope is crucial for their well-being. The blended learning approach enables a more personalized and customized learning experience. Managing students' experience positively in implementing hybrid learning will increase students' satisfaction and thus positively impact their willingness and commitment to study (Batista-Toledo & Gavilan, 2023).

4.4 Advantages of Online Assessments

Online assessments offer flexibility to both students and lecturers concerning their format and marking (Fung et al., 2022). Students can take the assessments wherever they are and it could be more time efficient to mark online assessments than those in a face-to-face invigilated exam. With the movement control restrictions been removed, students were expected to be back on campus for the face-to-face classes. Hence, online assessment would only be applicable to students who were not able to attend the courses on campus due to immigration restrictions or other issues such as illness, etc. However, online assessments can still be used for those on-campus students due to its benefits' and accendibility to both the students and the academics (Alruwais et al., 2018; Dumford & Miller, 2018).

4.5 Drawbacks of Online Assessments

Though it was observed that online assessment presented many benefits, it also presented challenges to both the educator and students. Firstly, assessment in a non-traditional, online environment involves distinct features compared to traditional (i.e., face-to-face) contexts. The primary cause of this is the asynchronous nature of the interaction between educators and students (Vonderwell et al., 2007); therefore, in order to develop successful assessment procedures that facilitate higher-order learning, online assessment forces educators to rethink online education pedagogy (Gikandi et al., 2011). The need for pedagogical consideration imposes challenges on educators, especially when educators are not equipped with pedagogical knowledge pertaining to online assessment.

Not only that, concerns about students' and teachers' technological incompetence as well as mistrust of the digital infrastructure, were also noted (Khan & Khan, 2019). The use of online assessment requires convincing of both instructors and students, and extensive training and support were needed to help, particularly educators, in adopting online assessment. This process was not only time-consuming but also put stress on the university's support system and staff (e.g., Learning and Teaching Unit).

4.6 Improvements in the Online Assessments in the Post-pandemic Era

Integrating the authentic and online assessment will likely continue during the post-pandemic period. The assessment is designed instead of weighing a student's performance against a standardized benchmark. The students execute tasks and actively participate in situations using the skills and knowledge from the subjects. It is all about getting the students to solve real-life

4th Kuala Lumpur International Conference on Management, Education and Technology 2023 (KLIMET 2023) e-ISBN: 978-967-2476-60-3

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

situations by applying the skills and knowledge they have mastered rather than asking students to memorize and recall facts.

Though it was observed throughout the semesters that online assessments presented their pros and cons, online assessment has proven to be a vital component of teaching and learning. A review study by Gikandi et al. (2011) on online assessment (particularly formative assessment) provided evidence that online assessment offers educators and students a meaningful educational experience, and it offers a pedagogical approach that lays the groundwork for transforming the culture of assessment in ways that promote equitable education, meeting a variety of learning needs; therefore, it is foreseeable that online assessment will stay after the pandemic.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the impact of the hybrid and blended learning, and online assessment methods during the pandemic and consider the suitability of their continuance in the post-pandemic era. It was found that the knowledge and skills in utilising technology to deliver the courses in hybrid and blended learning need to be enhanced if such a mode of teaching is to be continued. When students were not able to attend the classes physically due to some restrictions, hybrid or blended learning is the next best option since many academics have the experience of hybrid teaching. Online assessments would be suitable to promote more inclusivity that face-to-face assessments lack. However, academics need to consider other assessment methods to avoid overreliance on such kind of methods since online assessments need a reliable internet facility.

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