Inclination, Awareness and Readiness of Students Towards Flexible Learning Programs at TVET Institutions

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Abstract

The flexible learning approach represents a hybrid model between Open and Distance Learning, providing students the freedom to engage in courses offered online and accessible from anywhere. The implementation of flexible education programs in Polytechnics and Community Colleges (POLYCC) is still limited as these programs are relatively new. Therefore, this survey aims to identify the level of inclination, awareness, and readiness of students towards flexible education programs in the state of Johor, Malaysia. The study involves 540 Form 4 and 5 students from 20 schools in Johor. The researchers utilized a survey instrument with a five-point Likert scale with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability score of 0.89. Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS version 29, employing descriptive statistics. The study findings reveal high levels of inclination (mean=4.3), awareness (mean=3.9), and readiness (mean=4.02) among students towards flexible education programs. These results provide valuable insights for strategic planning to sustain the implementation of flexible education programs. Further research is recommended to identify issues and challenges in the implementation of flexible education programs in other institutions.

1.0   Introduction

Flexible learning, as defined by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), is an important mode of learning within the Accreditation of Learning Based on Prior Experience (APEL) framework, which is an elaborate approach that includes a variety of unconventional learning approaches. Among these, micro-credential courses stand out as an evolving educational trend, providing a dynamic channel for skill development and academic advancement. Embedded within this framework, these courses not only adapt to learners' changing requirements, but also act as a catalyst for societal growth.

In Malaysia, these initiatives have significantly enriched the educational landscape, extending the reach of Higher Education Institutions (IPT) to encompass a diverse array of learners, including those within the domain of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions such as

Polytechnics and Community Colleges (POLYCC).

By providing flexibility in terms of study schedules, course delivery methods and formats, these programs enable people from all walks of life to start on educational journeys tailored to their personal needs and goals. Furthermore, they play an important role in expanding access to education by breaking down obstacles that could have previously prevented participation in traditional learning environments.

Including flexible learning initiatives within Malaysia's educational system demonstrates a dedication to establish a dynamic and inclusive learning environment. Through the implementation of micro-credential courses and other creative approaches, the nation is prepared to develop a labor force that possesses the abilities, know-how, and flexibility needed to thrive in a constantly evolving global context.

Flexible learning, also known as a blended learning method, provides space for students to upgrade and improve their skills while keeping their existing jobs for career development (Muhammad, 2019). Various constraints such as geographical and physical issues can be overcome through a flexible learning approach. Thus, this approach has the potential to be adapted in various educational areas, training fields or job disciplines while enabling learning without limitations (Saamri et al., 2021).

Moreover, flexible learning uses an Open and Distance Learning model that allows students the opportunity to enroll in a variety of courses provided online, as well as anywhere in the world. The findings of previous studies found that inflexible learning systems make it difficult for students to transition between fields. Rigid and limited choice of majors does not allow students to make immediate changes from one academic discipline to another. As a result, it is too late for students to realize that the field they are in is not the right choice for them. This can lead to a lack of motivation, a decrease in their knowledge and skills, and ultimately, a decrease in their prospects (Saamri et al., 2021). Therefore, the time has come for all institutions, especially TVET institutions, to make a paradigm shift by offering flexible learning programs.

The study of the implementation of the flexible learning program at POLYCC is still lacking because this program has just been offered at three (3) selected institutions, namely Pasir Gudang Community College, Pagoh Community College, and Bandar Penawar Community College. Therefore, this survey was carried out with the aim of identifying the level of inclination, awareness, and readiness among upper secondary school students in the State of Johor towards flexible learning programs.

2.0   Literature Review
2.1   Flexible Learning Program
In educational research, flexible learning approaches have received a lot of attention. Among the efforts to transform the education system in Malaysia is by offering the flexible learning programs. This mode of study is named flexible

because students are given the opportunity to choose the field of study and the learning process is carried out according to their space and time (Muhammad, 2019). Saamri et al., (2021), explained that the flexible learning process has provided better space and opportunities especially to employed individuals who want to improve their knowledge, skills, and value at any time. This approach allows for various dimensions of flexibility, including time, content, entry requirements, delivery methods, assessment, resources, and support, catering to diverse student needs (Mildenberger & Steingruber, 2023).

While according to Taib et al., (2021), in addition to being able to improve students' skills, flexible learning programs also encourage social learning activities by allowing students to access their own learning materials quicker and easier at any time. Flexible learning not only benefits students to improve their skills towards a better career path but also indirectly cultivates the Lifelong Learning program in line with the Polytechnic Transformation Direction (2023-2030).

By providing students with choices, autonomy, and meaningful engagement in their learning process, flexible learning programs offer a dynamic and student-centered educational experience that can improve learning results. Flexible learning can be extremely important in today's educational system if it is able to successfully utilize technology and cater to students' varied demands.

2.2 Flexible Learning Programs at Polytechnics & Community Colleges

As one of nation's TVET institutions, POLYCC is committed to empowering the offer of flexible learning programs through three (3) strategies through the Polytechnic Transformation Direction 2023-2030.

The first strategy is to foster the offering of flexible learning programs at POLYCC. This was done by introducing the Open and Distance Learning model or also known as Open Distance Learning (ODL) which gives opportunities to working adults and youth to enroll in the flexible learning programs without having to quit their jobs.

The second strategy is to offer a short-term micro-credentials program to encourage any individual to improve their knowledge and self-qualification level. These programs are tailored to accommodate various skill levels and personal development goals. While the third strategy is to establish an Accreditation Center for Prior Experiential Learning (APEL A) which functions as a coordinator for the implementation of the APEL A program.

The establishment of POLYCC APEL A will allow prospective students to convert their current work experience or qualifications into sufficient prerequisites for them to further their studies at IPT, especially at POLYCC (Polytechnic Transformation Direction 2023-2030).

By implementing these initiatives, POLYCC aims to expand educational access as well as support lifelong learning programs, thereby contributing to

the country's continuing transformation and advancement of technical and vocational education.

2.3   Student Inclination, Awareness and Readiness

In the study by Miskam et al. (2020), the level of student readiness for online learning is at a high level. The authors also explained that students are found to be ready and show high interest and inclination when using various online learning platforms. In addition, the findings of this study also found that there was no difference in the level of online learning readiness of students according to gender.

The study of Marsus et al. (2023) states that students will show a positive response and a higher interest in their learning if they have a high level of awareness of the chosen study program. Therefore, this study suggests that higher education institutions provide a better understanding of the study programs offered through promotional activities and social media so that prospective students are more prepared and inclined towards the chosen study program.

Whereas according to the study of Taib et al. (2021), students are showing a good acceptance towards the benefits of implementing e-learning, especially the flexibility aspects of time and location of learning. However, most of the students are still not ready to change the face-to-face learning method to non-face-to-face through e-learning entirely because they have encountered problems to understand the learning content especially when the presentation of learning materials was less interesting and unable to capture the students' interest.

Similar findings were also reported in the study by Musa and Mohd (2023). The study also identified Internet availability as a significant driver of the perception of online teaching and learning, while discussions about finishing assignments and accessing learning programs without internet disruptions are judged less important. Nonetheless, frequent application use can help students master their online learning tools.

Based on these past studies, when there is a paradigm shift in the education system, various aspects should be studied to review the effectiveness of new strategies introduced in education. Since the flexible learning program at POLYCC has only just been offered, it is appropriate that this study be conducted to identify the level of students' inclination, awareness, and readiness towards flexible learning programs offered by POLYCC.

3.0   Methodology

This study involved a total of 540 Form 4 and 5 students from 20 schools in the State of Johor, Malaysia. The selection of respondents was done by using a simple random sampling technique with the total number of samples selected for the study being based on the sample size determination table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

The research instrument is a questionnaire for the Study of Supply and

Demand of Flexible Learning Programs at the Johor State Polytechnic and Community College. This questionnaire contains 33 items and has been confirmed by four (4) experts in the field at local public universities and polytechnics.

This questionnaire has a Cronbach's Alpha reliability score of 0.89. There are five (5) sections in this questionnaire. Part A refers to items related to the respondent's demographics, Part B relates to the tendency to continue studying, Part C relates to the selection of learning methods, Part D relates to awareness of flexible learning programs while Part E relates to willingness to follow flexible learning. Sections B to E contain five (5) scale items that use a Likert scale.

Quantitative data in this study was analyzed using IBM SPSS Version 29 software with descriptive statistics. While inferential statistics were determined using Pearson correlation coefficient analysis (Deng et al., 2021).

4.0   Results and Discussion

The study respondents consisted of 262 male (48.5%) and 278 female (51.5%). As shown in Table 1, respondents were distributed as follows:

Table 1: Distribution of Respondent

Gender	Interpretation	Percentage
Male	262	48.5%
Female	278	51.5%

The respondents in this study consisted of Form 4 and 5 students from schools in ten (10) districts in Johor. The following figure summarizes the distribution of respondents by district.

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents by district in the State of Johor

Descriptive methods were used in this study and all the findings that have been analyzed will be displayed in the form of a table showing the frequency, mean and standard deviation illustrated by the mean average score as in Table 2.

Table 2: Average score and mean interpretation

Mean Score	Interpretation
1.00 - 2.00	Low
2.01 - 3.00	Medium Low
3.01 - 4.00	Medium High
4.01 - 5.00	High

Source: Nunnally and Bernstein (1994)

According to the findings presented in Table 3, the overall mean score for the factor encompassing students' awareness, inclination, and willingness to participate in flexible learning programs within TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) institutions is significantly high, with a mean value of 4.10. This mean score falls between 4.01 to 5.00, according to Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) classification, indicating that respondents have a very positive attitude toward flexible learning initiatives.

Table 3: Findings mean and standard deviation of the study.

Factors	Frequency	Min	Std. Dev.
Readiness	540	4.02	0.49
Inclination	540	4.31	0.44
Awareness	540	3.98	0.49

Through descriptive statistical analysis it was found that respondents' inclination towards flexible learning programs at TVET institutions is at a high level (mean=4.3) compared to readiness (mean=4.02) and awareness (mean=3.9).

Exploring deeper into the various components of this factor, respondents have a significant preference for flexible learning programs, as indicated by the highest mean value recorded in this area, 4.31. This shows a strong inclination towards flexible learning programs among respondents.

Additionally, the mean score for respondents' readiness for flexible learning programs is significant, at 4.02. This demonstrates respondents' noteworthy readiness to participate in and adapt to the demands and dynamics of flexible learning approaches in the TVET setting.

While the mean score for respondents' awareness of flexible educational programs within TVET institutions is slightly lower than inclination and preparedness, it still indicates a relatively high degree of awareness, with a mean value of 3.98. This shows that respondents have a thorough awareness of the availability and potential benefits of flexible learning alternatives in the TVET area, which contributes to their overall positive perception and receptivity to such efforts.

The findings of the study prove that respondents show interest in flexible learning programs at TVET institutions. A study says that 95% of teenagers in the United States are online in a certain period (Madden, et al. 2013) so that they are nicknamed as digital natives by Marc Prensky (2001) because their lives are digitally connected and media-saturated (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; Shivam & Singh, 2015).

In the context of Malaysia, there is no contradiction with the study. In a report by Symantec Corporation (Norton Online Living Report (NOLR), 2009) on internet usage habits among teenagers in Malaysia mentions that they spend 16 hours a week surfing the internet which the findings are 6 hours higher than the global NOLR average time when compared to 12 another major country in the world (Hassan & Rashid, 2012). This could be a factor in the tendency of respondents in this study towards flexible learning programs with digital features.

5.0   Conclusion

Overall, the study proves that there is a tendency, willingness, and awareness among students towards flexible learning programs. This positive reception is in line with the statement of the former Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh in 2016 who called for Malaysians to be encouraged to adopt a flexible learning style to increase the value of the country's education system. He stated that flexible learning is seen as a broader space that focuses on providing education anytime, anywhere to anyone.

The findings in this study have emphasized the importance of understanding the views and experiences of students in flexible learning to improve its

effectiveness and address the challenges associated with it. Therefore, students need to be exposed to the knowledge of flexible learning so that they are more prepared and confident to follow this program.

In conclusion, the results of these findings provide input to the JPPKK to make strategic plans to ensure the successful implementation of the flexible learning program at POLYCC. This study only provides an overview of students in the State of Johor.

Therefore, a survey study on the student population throughout the state should be conducted because it can provide input to the JPPKK in improving the implementation of the flexible learning program. In addition, to preserve the goal of implementing this flexible learning program, further research recommendations on the issues and challenges of flexible learning programs in other institutions should also be carried out.

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Conflicts Of Interest
The manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not being considered by other journals. All authors have approved the review, agree with its Submission, and declare no conflict of interest in the manuscript.

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