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REMOTE ONLINE ACADEMIC ADVISING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT:

The Covid-19 pandemic forced academics worldwide to quickly shift to online classes. In the Malaysian context, this shift invites diverse reactions from students concerning the cost of high-speed data plans, poor connectivity, and instability of learning platforms which eventually affected the psychological and emotional state of the students. Reacting to these issues, one university in Malaysia rendered students with three options: to continue studies online, continue studies online with minimum credit, or defer their studies. While residing in remote areas and in reaching a decision, students turn to their academic advisors for advice. This remote online advising, however, posed challenges to the academic advisors. This study explored the challenges experienced by the academic advisors in rendering remote online advising and proposes suggestions to cater to those challenges. Assisted by the interview protocol, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 academic advisors. Each interview session was recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then emailed to the participants for verification. The transcripts were analyzed thematically with the assistance of Nvivo12. The findings revealed that academic advisors faced four main challenges in performing remote online advising. This study is significant in enhancing remote online academic advising for students' satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Although the education of 4.0IR allows diverse ways for students' learning irrespective of their location, it is only actively utilized around the world with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic forced academicians worldwide to quickly shift to online teaching and learning using available online platforms (Al-Lily, Ismail, Abunasser, & Alqahtani, 2020). Webex, Zoom, and Google-Meet are examples of the most common platforms used for online teaching and learning by higher education institutions. The shift to fully online learning, however, receives diverse reactions from the various

levels of stakeholders and students with different reasons (Toquero, 2020). In Malaysian context for example, the shift to fully online teaching and learning invites diverse reactions from students concerning the cost of high-speed data plans, poor internet connectivity, and instability of learning platforms. Others objected to the very dull online teaching and learning as opposed to the innovative teaching and learning pedagogies that include service-learning like they used to experience to sustain long hours of online teaching and learning (Said, Ahmad, Hassan & Awang, 2015). These issues, if not dealt with quickly, may affect the psychological and emotional state of the students.

Reacting to the above issues, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, one of the five research universities in Malaysia, quickly rendered students with three options: continue studies fully online with full credit hours, continue studies fully online with minimum credit hours, or completely defer their studies for the incoming semester. As one of the leading universities in Malaysia, UTM is housed with about 40 percent of students from low-income families (or often called B40); families with a monthly average of total income of below RM3000 (less than USD740). The majority of these B40 families reside in remote areas and the majority of students from these B40 families are the first child of the families who is entering tertiary education. Prior to Movement Control Order (MCO) enforcement on 18 March 2020, a huge majority of local students have already left campus to stay home with families, while other students, due to the conditions of their family homes and internet connectivity issues, made a request to remain on campus. For international students, a big majority of them decided to remain in campus hostels and houses surrounding the campus while a small portion requested to leave Malaysia and reside in their home countries. They decided to continue their studies through fully online teaching and learning with full credit hours.

While residing at the family homes in remote areas and in reaching a decision, students turn to their academic advisors for advice. Additionally, faced with the changing needs of students resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, academic advisors are asked by the university management to shift to alternative academic advising modes to ensure that students receive continuous advising. This remote online advising, however, poses challenges to the academic advisors as they are not accustomed to providing advising services online. Additionally, in the context of Malaysia, as academic advisors are also lecturers (Van, Said, & Khan, 2016b; Van, Said, Rameli, Karim, Tajuddin, & Chai, 2015; Van, Said, Mohd Rameli & Khan, 2018; Van Nguyen, Said, Khan & Ghani, 2017), they too need to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills of running online teaching and learning. As they are playing dual roles, they have limited time to solve issues related to academic advising. They have difficulty to add more hours for advising in addition to the two hours of weekly meeting set and stated in their working schedule. They eventually have to juggle between advising and teaching.

The presence of COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of higher education in Malaysia (Shah et al., 2020) and the rest of the world (Toquero, 2020). The pandemic forced higher education institutions to focus much attention on the COVID pedagogy-related aspects. However, a review of the Scopus database conducted via a search using the keywords "remote academic advising" and "COVID-19" indicated that there were very few papers published (until 15/10/2020) with a focus on the main factors "online program" and

"learning & development". The scarcity of publications related to academic advising can be understood as during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic advising mainly assisted students to understand how online programs are running and how students can maximize their potential to reach the highest learning and development achievement. Figure 1 below shows the bibliometric analysis of Scopus database with the keyword "academic advising" and "COVID-19".

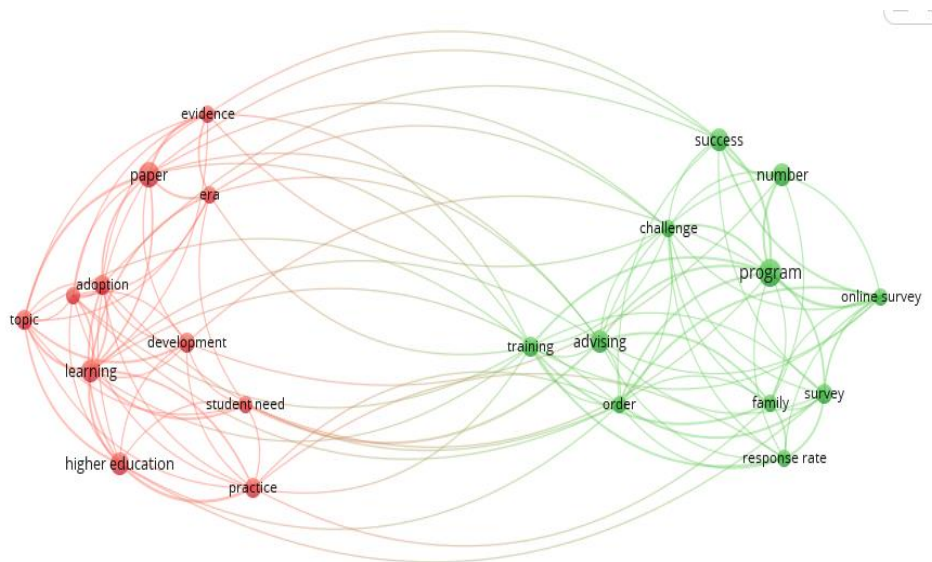


Figure 1: Bibliometric analysis of Scopus Database with the keywords "academic advising" & "COVID-19" (15 Oct 2020).

The review of the literature also revealed that when confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, many higher education institutions adopted technology-mediated advising for connecting, informing and guiding students to move through their online teaching and learning (Cao, Fang, Hou, Han, Xu, Dong, & Zheng, 2020; Sahu, 2020). This indicates that online advising is utilized as a means to help students to develop and achieve personal, interpersonal, and academic success through a guided relationship with the academic advisors (Hu, 2020; Wicks, 2020; Rimbau-Gilabert, Martinez-Arguelles, & Ruiz-Dotras, 2011). Similar actions have been taken by the Malaysian higher education institutions as well as other government agencies and non-governmental organizations (Shah et al., 2020). The subsequent paragraphs of this article describe challenges faced by the UTM academic advisors in performing their dual roles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior to the first MCO resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the UTM management team has prepared academicians for the online teaching and learning system to adapt to the education of IR4.0. Various in-house training programs were designed and conducted to train academicians to prepare them to become future-ready educators. Thus, when MCO is enforced, the office of Vice-Chancellor (VC) quickly issued a statement to resume teaching and learning activities through existing online facilities. The announcement by the VC's office regarding this online teaching and learning was released even before the press statement made by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education. The statement from the UTM VC's office can be summarized as follows: 1) Teaching and learning activities must be continued through online

teaching and learning until further notice; 2). The online learning methods must give priority to lectures, assignments, projects, presentations, and others over physical face-to-face teaching and learning. Additionally, alternative online teaching and learning methods are preferred for practical teaching and learning activities, and assessment including final examination, and service-learning; 3) The faculty and academic staff are required to provide inclusive and appropriate distance learning methods, which also take into consideration students who have limited access to internet to participate fully in online teaching and learning; 4) Students are requested to remain at home or at their respective accommodations to follow distance and online teaching and learning activities for the entire semester; 5) Teaching and learning activities which cannot be completed during Semester II, especially those that require physical presence of the students such as workshops, laboratories, studios, service learning, final examinations, and others should be carried out toward the end of Semester II and/or Semester III. The implementation of face-to-face teaching and learning activities, if necessary, is also subject to strict Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and the government's decision on the MCO (Shah et al., 2020).

Many studies reported the importance of academic advising in fulfilling the mission of higher education through positive relations with students until their degree completion (Drake Jordan, & Miller, 2013; Shaffer, Zalewski & Leveille, 2010; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008; Swecker, Fifolt & Searby, 2013;). Historically, researchers found that effective academic advising can significantly increase the students' chances of success undergoing higher education challenges (Bahr, 2008; Wiseman & Messitt, 2010; Zhang, 2016). Other studies indicated that for the past many years academic advising has successfully helped students overcome their academic challenges in making the right decision (Gordon, 2006; O'Banion, 1994; Verdier, 1984). During those times, academic advising was set up to enable students to select the most appropriate learning itinerary based on their needs, educational goals, and time availability (Tajuddin, Said, & Nor, 2019; Van, Said, Awang, & Khan, 2016a). This support ensures that the university can facilitate the students for their time and money invested. The students can always connect with the universities and follow the selected educational itinerary to maintain good achievement and graduate on time (Smith & Allen, 2006). During this COVID-19 pandemic, once again the academic advisors are tasked to provide remote online advising to students. Based on the above-mentioned scenario, this study aims to explore the challenges experienced by the academic advisors in rendering remote online advising to support students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nohman Khan en Qureshi 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted using a one-to-one semi-structured interview. The qualitative data were collected based on the interview with ten academic advisors who have great experience in the advising fields and their students regarded as having high achievement in the semester when the COVID-19 crisis occurred. The interview session was guided by the interview protocol which was developed, reviewed, and validated by the experts to ensure validity and reliability. Each interview session was recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then the interview transcripts were emailed to each respective participant for verification. The participants were informed that they can

change, modify, and re-word the transcripts. The verified transcripts were analysed thematically with the assistance of NVivo12.

RESULTS

This part responds to the research question, “What are the challenges experienced by the academic advisors in rendering remote online advising during COVID-19 pandemic?” Figure 2 below shows the coding for data analysis while Figure 3 describes themes developed based on the analysis.

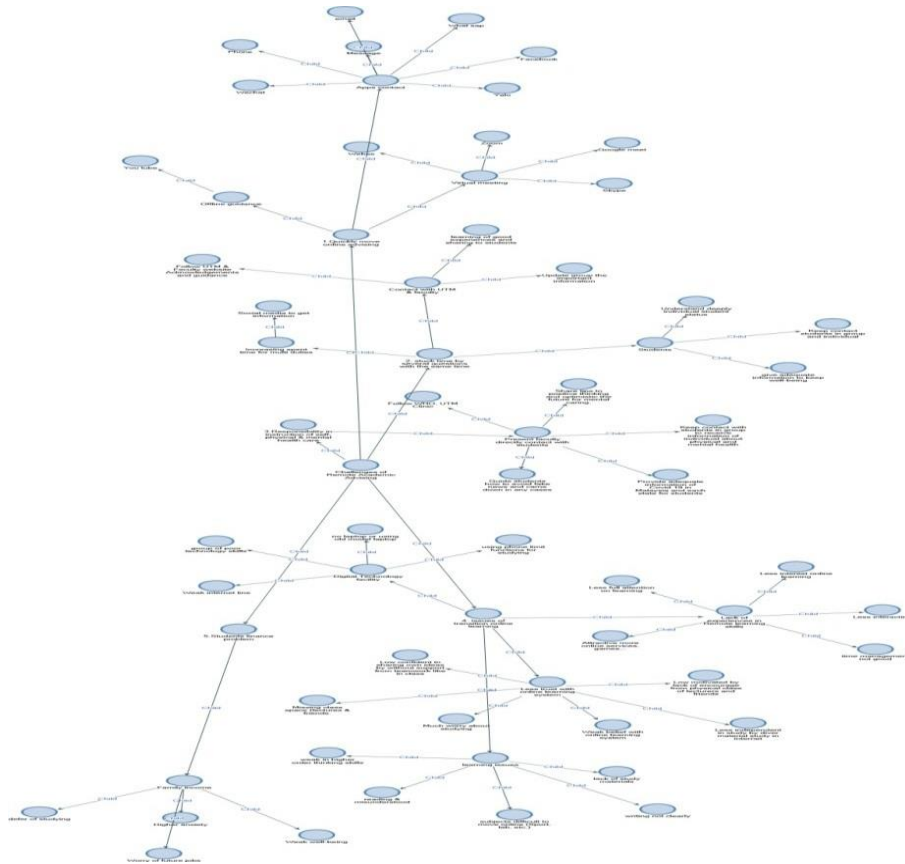


Figure 2: Coding of Data Analysis

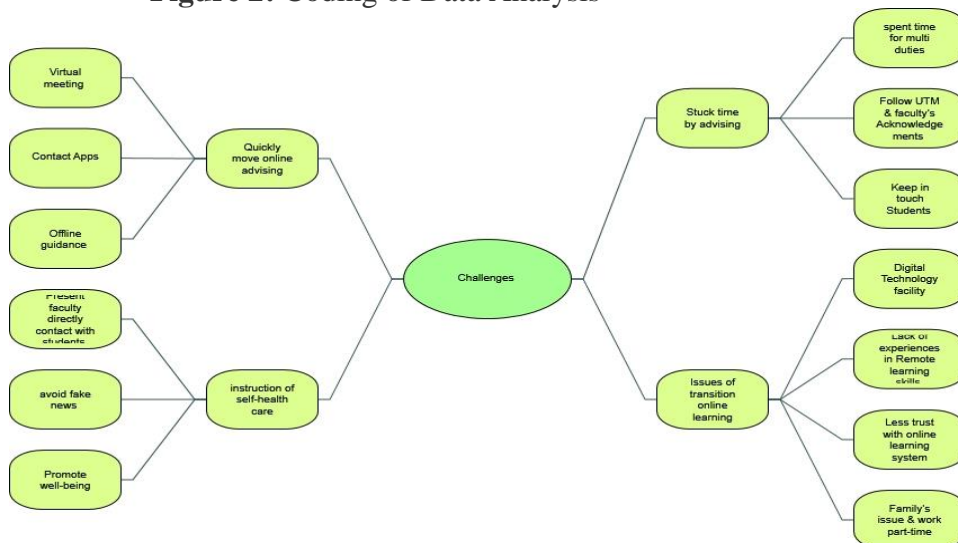


Figure 3: Theme Development in Data Analysis

Based on the thematic analysis, the following themes emerged: Quick move to online advising, increase time for remote advising, online learning transition issues, and self-health care instruction. Each of the themes will be discussed below.

Theme 1: Quick move to online advising

The theme, “quick move to online advising” is the first theme that emerged based on the data analysis. Further analysis of this theme revealed three subthemes as follows: Virtual meeting, contact app, and office guideline. The analysis indicated that when UTM decided to employed a fully online teaching and learning mode, academic advisors also quickly moved to online remote advising in the efforts to ensure that students are prepared and readied to join the online classes. For the international students, who are located in various locations, either on-campus hostels or their home countries, due to restrictions of certain countries, academic advisors need to install new apps to communicate with the students. Apps such as “We-chat App” is used to contact students in China, “Zalo App” is applied to communicate with students from Vietnam, “Line App” is employed to contact students residing in Thailand, and many other apps in addition to commonly and regularly used apps in Malaysia like WhatsApp, messenger, telegram, and email which have some restrictions to reach students’ home countries. In addition to those apps, academic advisors also started to learn and apply virtual video meetings such as Google-Meet, Webex, Zoom, FB, and Skype. The analysis also revealed that besides using virtual videos, academic advisors also shared offline videos or YouTube links about the guidelines including guideline for final examination through various channels including e-learning. All these approaches were employed to ensure that students gain confidence to contact their academic advisors and continue their studies online.

Some remarks given by academic advisors are as follows:

[...] My student went back to China; then I must use We-chat to contact him because Facebook or WhatsApp could not reach students in this country”.

[...] I'm a lecturer and academic advisor, I learn how to teach students online by using Webex or Google-Meet, I guide students on how to prepare to join the online class, not only listen but active in discussions, interact with friends and lecturers."

Theme 2: Increase time for remote advising

The second theme that emerged from the analysis of data regarding the challenges of online academic advising was ‘increase time for remote advising’. Further analysis of the theme revealed the following three subthemes: More time for multi duties, follow UTM and faculty guideline, and engagement with students. Each of these themes will be discussed further below.

During the MCO, UTM students were asked to be isolated either at the hostels or they had already returned to their family homes. At the same time, online learning was established and promoted to ensure that all students can continue their learning processes without interruption. The quick shift to the new environment of online teaching and learning, however, raised many questions

from the students relating to their studies. To get answers to their concerns, the first person that they contacted was their academic advisors. This is understandable because academic advisors are assigned and attached to students since they are in the first year of their studies. This long duration of relationship enhances their trust in each other.

The analysis revealed that the questions raised by remote students can be categorized into two groups. The students who stayed on campus hostels posed questions of the following nature: “how am I prepared for the online learning?”; “I don’t think I am prepared for an online course. May I defer my study this semester?” On the other hand, students who stayed at their family homes raised questions of a slightly different nature: “I cannot study well using this online method. Too noisy here. How can I improve my performance?”; “I do not fully believe in online learning? I cannot focus on my study”; How can I adapt with new online learning system?”. The analysis also revealed that in addressing questions from students, academic advisors eventually have to spend more time advising and engaging students, in addition to other duties. To avoid overwork, the academic advisors often asked students to just follow whatever procedures and guidelines provided by the university management.

With the task to keep students informed and engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic advisors need to understand each individual student's situation deeply, provide adequate information on the current situation, and maintain regular contact. This new task posed challenges to academic advisors as they also have to perform their routine tasks, teaching and learning. As mentioned earlier, academic advisors are also academicians or lecturers, thus, they are also requested to attend several online training courses to update themselves with online teaching methods.

Some of the comments by the academic advisors can be seen as follows:

[...] *I was busy with an academic advising job at this time. My phone is jammed by a huge number of messages from students asking questions.*

[...] *WhatsApp was jammed by the many questions from students at the same time*

[...] *When working at home, I need to manage many things at the same time: caring for children, attend online class organized by UTM to update online teaching methods; advising students and to prepare online learning, teaching online.*

Theme 3: Assist students in self-health care

The third theme that emerged based on the data analysis is to “assist students in self-health care.” Further refinement of the theme revealed the following three subthemes: faculty contacts students directly, avoid fake news, and promote students’ well-being.

To date, there is abundant information related to COVID-19 pandemic covered by the social media. This flow of information if not properly managed may negatively affect students. The coverage of information related to COVID-19 pandemic resulted in academic advisors facing huge challenges when taking the role as a bridge to connect the faculty and students. Academic advisors have to provide guidance and direction to students on safety issues which is beyond their expertise. They have to advise students to maintain overall well-being by

focusing on resources from WHO and the university management. They are also tasked to advise students to avoid fake news and adhere to standard operating procedures (SOP) established by the Ministry of Higher Education. Students are also advised to do light exercises at home to reduce their anxiety level and strengthen their overall well-being.

Some of the academic advisors reported as follows:

[...] As an academic advisor, I contact with my students in a group and share with them about the status of the COVID-19 cases in Malaysia, update them day by day; share knowledge on self-protect, rely on authentic reports or news from WHO, the Malaysian government, and the university.

[...] Academic advisors respond to students about their health status during COVID-19 pandemic; Share tips on positive thinking and optimistic about the future.

Theme 4: Students' readiness to shift to online learning

The final theme that emerged from the analysis is "students' readiness to shift to online learning". Further analysis of the theme revealed the following subthemes: digital technology facilities, experience in remote learning, trust to online learning system, and family issues and part-time job.

During the MCO, UTM in general and faculties in particular conducted a series of online training courses specifically for academic staff to assist them in using online platforms for effective teaching and learning processes. At the same time, lecturers and academic advisors start to help students to know how online classroom looks like and what knowledge and skills students need to acquire to move into online courses effectively. The analysis of data revealed that students need to have information communication technology (ICT) facilities such as laptops, computers or smartphones and strong internet connection at home to join the online learning classroom. The analysis showed that academic advisors encourage students to possess current model of laptops or computers to ensure its compatibility with current requirements including its speed. The analysis revealed that, as some students come from low-income families, academic advisors try to find ICT resources to ensure students can learn better.

Some of the academic advisors reported as follows:

[...] The internet in Malaysia is strong enough; however, when a huge number of students use the internet at the same time, that is a challenge.

[...] My students' homes located in areas with weak internet connectivity and the old model of the laptops posed challenges for them to join online learning

The analysis of data also revealed that some students shared with their academic advisors, the challenges they encountered in undergoing their studies fully online. The academic advisors reported that a few students commented that they could not pay attention to the long duration of lectures, they have a low level of interest in online learning, and they miss the regular face-to-face interactions with friends and lecturers in the classrooms. The analysis revealed that although online learning offers flexibility for students to learn at any time convenient to them, they still cannot follow the lesson in its entirety as they work part-time. This leads them to spend insufficient time studying.

Additionally, a few students reported to their academic advisors that as they are at a young age, they were easily distracted to music shows, games, advertisement services, and others while following the online learning. Some of them spent too much time playing games or indulging in entertainment, resulting in not having enough time for intensive study,

The analysis of data also revealed that students experienced psychological discomfort as they were already accustomed to learn in the physical classroom with face-to-face meetings and studying with multi-support resources with their peers and lecturers. When they shift to fully online learning, their fears and anxiety towards the efficiency of remote online classes take a toll on them. They reported that they have limited interest in online learning, they feel that their life is dull, and they eventually become less active online classroom participants. The analysis of data also revealed that academic advisors worried that these unintended scenario or incidents may negatively affect their students' learning achievements. The academic advisors also reported that since the majority of their students come from low-income family groups with no role models, they may be prone to experience high level of anxiety and low level of well-being due to future job prospects resulting from COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the academic advisors commented as follows:

[...] feel bored when studying in an isolated place such as our parent house
[...] lack of confidence to share own ideas without the support from team members like in the physical classroom
[...] feel weak to start joining an online learning system

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to explore the challenges experienced by the academic advisors in implementing remote academic advising during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was conducted at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, a research university in Malaysia. At this university, academic advising has been part of student service programs for more than three decades (Thuy Van, Said, & Mohamad Nor, 2019; Van Nguyen, Said, Khan, & Ghani, 2017). Undergraduate students, right from the beginning of their presence at this university, are assigned to at least one lecturer, particularly from the same faculty, to assist and develop their potentials in three areas of development: academic, personal, and career development. Lecturers who are appointed as academic advisors will be asked to allocate at least two hours per week of their schedule to meet their students. These two hours are counted as their working workloads and their performance in running the development programs is included in their yearly performance appraisal (Van, Said, Awang, & Khan, 2016a; Van, Said, & Khan, 2016b).

Working in a group, the students and academic advisors are asked to plan, design and execute the development programs and activities covering those three areas (Van et al., 2015). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they experienced a very conducive on-campus learning environment where physical face-to-face meetings or activities worked smoothly. Thus, the physical face-to-face advising sessions are very much welcomed. However, things started to change with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic where face-to-face meetings are not allowed and must be avoided. The academic advisor, faculty, and the university management generally have limited experience undergoing

this type of environment in running the university. Thus, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic really posts a challenge to them.

When the university management decided to shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to online teaching and learning, students eventually are divided into three isolated learning places, either on-campus hostels where the numbers are not large, family home with fewer support resources (including limited conducive space to study, lack of reliable internet connectivity, and mismatch in computer or laptop model with university system requirements) or home countries with limited access to the university due to country policies regarding access restrictions to the outside world. This situation posts challenges not only to students but also to lecturers. Facing challenges, the students turn to their academic advisors for advice through remote online academic advising. Bombarded with many questions through various social media including Telegram, WeChat, or WhatsApp from students, academic advisors have to juggle their jobs between teaching and advising. Apparently, the two hours of consultation is no longer adequate in this current scenario. This situation eventually drives academic advisors to work beyond the two hours originally assigned to them.

The findings of this study revealed that remote online advising can be considered value added to the collegiate experience beyond the online classroom experience as commented by previous researchers (White, 2020; Yarbrough, 2002). During the COVID-19 pandemic, students experienced limited access to reliable technology and thus faced significant challenges to stay informed and engaged as reported by Crooks, Hoover and Smith (2020). Thus, remote online academic advising provides an effective exchange of information and platform to engage and support students' online learning to improve students' retention and satisfaction (Cuseo, 2003; Glennen, Farren, & Vowell, 1996).

With the many challenges during the COVID-19 crisis, higher education institutions can take full advantage of digital technology that covers all fields of studies and academic advising is one of the students' support system available to embrace digital technology that brings many benefits to students (Kalamkarian, Boynton, & Lopez, 2018). For example, online academic advising allows academic advisors to provide remote students with online learning strategies to enhance their learning experience and to compensate for the reduced campus experience that they were supposed to receive (Dirr, 1999). Having a vibrant remote academic advising program adds value to higher education institutions. The university administrators can mobilize those involved to handle concerns raised by students in a more professional way. Additionally, the presence of online academic advising can ensure that students are connected to their primary academic advisors.

The study revealed that academic advising at UTM has been structured and designed to provide advising accessibility to students regardless of the nature of the situations (Van et al., 2016a; Van et al., 2016b, N Khan en Qureshi 2020). The remote academic advising employed enables faculty management to enhance student–advisor relationship building and support student learning. Despite its ability to render remote academic advising, academic advisors still faced challenges in the delivery of online remote academic advising. Thus, they develop online remote academic advising strategies to battle those challenges.

Suggestions for smooth remote online academic advising delivery may include the following: 1) embrace advanced technology application for remote advising; 2) set clear goals and plans for smooth remote academic advising; 3) enhance knowledge and update information regarding the pandemic regularly; 4) share strategies for online learning successes, and 5) motivate and engage students periodically throughout the pandemic.

The findings revealed that constant supports from academic advisors through online remote academic advising is crucial for students' success. This indicates that providing assistance and guidance related to online teaching and learning strategies is an integral part of the delivery of quality education (LaPadula, 2003; Noaman & Ahmed, 2015; Wilson, 2004;). This finding is relevant especially for first-year students, who are experiencing university life for the first time and have had no opportunity to attend physical face-to-face classes on campus, due to the COVID-19 crisis. Since this year is the first time that they join online classes, they need online academic advisors who also function as instructors to explore and accustom themselves with the higher education environment.

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