Chapter 12
Understanding the Preferences for Online Learning:
Online MBAs in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is promoted by the Malaysian Government as a key element in the Higher Education Blueprint 2015-25 (Shift 9: Globalized Online Learning), but research in the Malaysian context is very underdeveloped. This chapter aims to fill part of this gap with a simple analysis of online Master of Business Administration (MBA) courses to examine the appetite and preferences of actual and potential MBA students for online learning. Using data from local and international students studying on MBA programs in Malaysia, the authors show that the MBA students in their sample still have a largely instrumental view of the value drivers of their study programs. The key factors identified by the largest number of groups were facilities, price, certificate authenticity, duration, and flexibility of course times.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is promoted by the Malaysian Government as a key element in the Higher Education Blueprint 2015-25 (Shift 9: Globalized Online Learning). Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the public and private sector are investing heavily on this approach but international research on the effectiveness of online learning is mixed and research in the Malaysian context is very under-developed.

Although many Malaysian HEIs are investing in online learning their motive is often simply due to pressure from the Malaysian Government which has identified online learning as a key performance target in the Higher Education Blueprint 2015-25 (Shift 9: Globalized Online Learning). Others see online MBAs as a new source of income reaching out to unexplored customers who find traditional offerings unattractive for various reasons. The Covid-19 pandemic of early 2020 has also been a driver of online education as a response to campus closedowns.

Nonetheless the effectiveness of these learning methods is not established and high levels of investment may not be justified. Further, international evidence on online learning suggests that completion rates are very low, even for world-leading institutions like the University of London, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). As such we do not know whether this investment is worthwhile, what will be the best teaching approaches and how we can improve the completion and success rates for online learners.

This chapter aims to fill part of this gap with a simple analysis of online courses, specifically online Master of Business Administration (MBA) courses, aimed at uncovering the appetite and preferences of actual and potential MBA students for online learning using data from local and international students studying in MBA programs in Malaysia.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON ONLINE AND BLENDED MBAS

Much of the literature on the success factors for online MBA courses focus on case studies of particular programs. For example, Roe, Toma, Alfred and Yallapragada, (2015) look at the factors required in developing a high quality online MBA using the example of the College of Business at Arkansas State University which has been ranked number 1 in faculty credentials and training and in the top 15 in all categories among all online MBA programs by "U. S. News and World Report" for three consecutive years. They argue that from the beginning, many online degree programs were viewed as low quality compared to traditional programs and because of this, many public and private universities were slow to adopt them. However, this attitude changed as more and more "non-traditional" students began to enter business schools and employees already holding jobs began to seek to improve their qualifications by studying while still working. For both these groups, online degree programs offered an opportunity to go to school while still being employed. In response to these changes, many schools offering traditional MBA programs began to offer online MBA programs to meet the market demand and to compete with other schools. In line with this trend, Arkansas State University launched a high quality online MBA program that parallels the best of the other online MBA programs.

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