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PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATION MECHANISM FOR ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) IN A POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

Substantial growth was seen in Open Distance Learning (ODL), and the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the expansion of online learning across all levels of education. The preferences on the program structure and communication mechanism and fundamentals of quality of education received are not widely documented. Considering the vacuum, the study aims to explore the potential of offering a postgraduate Doctor of Philosophy program through an open distance learning (ODL) module. The study primarily explores program structure preferences and communication mechanisms to meet the needs and expectations of prospective students. The quantitative-based research, using an online questionnaire survey technique as the main research strategy, was conducted between January and February 2023 and gathered feedback from 163 respondents representing potential and recently graduated PhD students, academia, and education agencies. The findings indicate that responders largely acknowledge mixed-mode programs, blended delivery methods that combine online classes with conventional face-to-face teaching mechanisms, and synchronous online teaching. Hence, they should be widely used in establishing new postgraduate programmes. The ODL programs will offer flexibility in scheduling and pace, allowing students to balance their studies with personal and professional responsibilities.

Keywords: *Online Distance Learning, Postgraduate Program, Mixed Mode Program*

INTRODUCTION

Open distance learning (ODL) is a program that combines the traditional face-to-face teaching method with the flexibility of the online teaching method. Also known as e-learning, refers to the process of acquiring knowledge and skills using electronic media, primarily the Internet. The main characteristics of open distance learning can be summarised into education that is carried out remotely, as well as through the contact of students and teachers in a digital environment (Tsarapkina, 2021).

Substantial growth was seen in Asia with more than 11 countries and over 70 universities offering ODL programs. Similarly, The United States exhibits steady enrolment growth for higher open and distance education. Online education in the United States has rapidly grown, with 6.7 million students enrolled in an online course in 2012 (Kentnor, 2015). In 2015, the number of students enrolled in at least one distance-learning course approached 6 million, with close to half of those students enrolled in programs that are exclusively online (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Hobson & Puruhito, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the expansion of online learning across all levels of education (Masalimov et al., 2022). Since most universities and other educational institutions had to close as a preventative measure against COVID-19, online education replaced face-to-face learning. Certainly, the pandemic reveals the need for transformation, professional training, and improved internet connectivity to support ODL (Masalimova et al., 2022; Mouratidis & Papagiannakis, 2021; Salas et al., 2022).

The application of the ODL higher education institutions is unavoidable, as universities are becoming more independent and capturing a greater number of students is inevitable in maintaining sustainable financial sheet balance. The ODL program is more commonly offered for undergraduate programs compared for postgraduate (Alzahrani, 2019; DiRienzo & Lilly, 2014). This is primarily due to the suitability of the modular undergraduate programs, which ensure a more organized program structure and communication mechanism. Adoption of ODL programs, especially in postgraduate programs to a certain extent, could contribute to changes in university enrolment policy, particularly the adoption program structure that is more flexible and synchronized (Sharma et al., 2019).

Conversely, the postgraduate program applies a higher thinking order related to problem-solving, synthesizing issues, and proposing solutions, necessitating great flexibility in program structure to foster independent self-exploratory and self-motivated postgraduates. Through the program, a dissertation or thesis is the ultimate output that reports the development of new knowledge and addresses knowledge gaps in the literature. Considering the complexity of the postgraduate program structure and the demanding outcomes, traditional communication mechanisms, particularly face-to-face supervision, have long been preferred. This approach emphasizes maintaining close supervision, however, resulting in spatial and temporal constraints for many students, limiting flexibility and accessibility.

According to Chong (2022), most PhD candidates were already accustomed to online learning platforms, such as emailing their supervisors for help or direction. The advancement of the Internet of things has significantly influenced the adoption of Internet-based communication mechanism that allows better flexibility. In an ODL program, postgraduate supervision is mainly undertaken through various online platforms, i.e., video conferencing, email, and mobile apps. However, the technique faced criticism for its effectiveness in online distance education (Fast et al., 2022) and concerns about maintaining communication with students (Broome et al., 2011).

While ODL has gained significant traction in contemporary undergraduate education, the extent of acceptance of program structure and communication mechanisms for postgraduate programs is inadequately documented, hindering the development of strategies for informing the needs of potential students. In typical PhD programs, students often conduct extensive research on a specialized subject. Most PhD programs globally are structured as research mode programs. These are designed for candidates to focus primarily on independent, original research under the supervision of academic supervisors, culminating in a dissertation or thesis. While some institutions or countries may offer "mixed-mode" PhDs (which combine coursework and research), the research mode is more prevalent for doctoral studies, especially in traditional disciplines like sciences, engineering, and humanities. In this mode, candidates may still attend seminars or workshops, but the core requirement is their research output. In Malaysia, mixed-mode Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs are very limited, unlike master's and undergraduate programs. Thus, this research aimed to explore the preferences of potential postgraduate students and stakeholders regarding key aspects of online distance learning, including program structure (type and mode of study) and communication mechanisms (timing, mode, and platform).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Program Structure and Communication Mechanism

In Malaysia, higher degree programs are monitored and regulated by two key bodies: the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). The MQA ensures the quality and standards of educational programs, while the MOHE oversees the governance and administration of the higher education system. To maintain the flexibility needed for Online Distance Learning (ODL)

while adhering to these standards, the Malaysian education system follows the "Standards: Master's & Doctoral Degree 2021." This document sets guidelines to ensure that master's and doctoral programs meet high academic standards and prepare graduates effectively. Building on this framework, the study explores key components in PhD program development, including study mode (full-time vs. part-time), PhD structure (research vs. mixed mode), and ODL components such as communication timing, mode, and platforms. This approach ensures PhD programs meet regulatory requirements and address diverse student needs.

Types of PhD Program

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program aims to produce graduates with advanced in-depth knowledge of a specialized field or develop innovative, practical solutions to sector-specific issues. PhD Graduates possess advanced interdisciplinary expertise, leadership, creativity, and managerial skills, demonstrating a deep understanding and critical perspective on complex real-world problems relevant to their study area (Broome et al., 2011; Fast et al., 2022). In mainstream PhD programs, students typically engage in full research within a specialized area. Full research requires self-learning and exploration of interest, resulting in a non-structured education program. Contrary to the hybrid or mixed-mode PhD programs, these programs combine modular teaching elements and research activities, with a balance of either 50-50, 40:60 or 30-70 (SMDD, 2021). In research-based PhD programs, assessment focuses primarily on a detailed evaluation of the research work, including both a written report and a verbal defence (viva voce). Contrary, in mixed-mode PhD programs, that combine taught course and thesis, students are assessed through examinations, assignments, or projects related to the taught subjects, alongside evaluations of research quality based on the research report and verbal defence. Each PhD program certainly carries benefits and the ability to cater to certain needs of potential students. The research mode provides greater flexibility in setting research milestones, therefore ideal for students who are self-motivated and prefer a more independent approach. In contrast, the mixed mode offers a more structured experience, with fixed milestones and a set schedule for completion. This nature is beneficial for those who thrive with clear guidelines and timelines.

Mode of Study

The mode of study refers to a student's enrolment status, such as full-time, part-time, or other arrangements. Most postgraduate students are part-time, while full-time students are predominantly international or students who received research grants. The choice of study mode has notable implications on the duration of studies and the research environment. In Malaysia, full-time mod studies have a minimal two-and-a-half to three-year study plan, while part-time students usually take at least four years (SMDD, 2021). This, however, has little implication on the research maturity or involvement of the student. According to Paliktzoglou (2011), full-time students benefit from being physically present in the department, allowing for greater commitment and practical research observation. This immersive experience is critical for developing comprehensive research skills and fostering close mentorship relationships with faculty and undergoing research. Additionally, Zhang et al. (2020) and Zhang et al. (2011) noted that full-time students have more opportunities for grant-related research, involvement in teaching and supervision, and clearer scholarly development goals than part-time students. These factors are essential for academic maturity, nurturing interest in research and shaping future academic careers.

However, part-time students often balance their studies with professional and personal responsibilities, which can enhance their practical experience and time management skills. Lee (2021) and Zhang et al. (2020) enlighten that part-time students benefit from the ability to work and conduct research simultaneously. Moreover, part-time study offers a better balance of social life and the ability to meet diverse needs simultaneously. This balance can lead to a more holistic educational experience and overall satisfaction (El Refae et al., 2021). Therefore, exploring the preferences of future students is essential to inform the university to develop suitable strategies or to consider providing more opportunities for part-time students to engage in research activities, ensuring they can fully benefit from their academic programs.

Communication Timing: Asynchronous Vs Synchronous

A synchronous learning environment is where the teacher and the students meet online on a specific online platform to teach and communicate about a lesson (Amiti, 2020). While asynchronous environments provide students with readily available material in audio/video lectures, handouts, articles and presentation slides. These materials are accessible anytime, anywhere (Raymond et al., 2016). Synchronous and asynchronous communication are key methods used in distance learning. Synchronous communication happens in real-time, allowing participants to interact immediately through streaming audio, video, and other communication technologies (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019). Contrastingly, asynchronous communication occurs over time with a time lag and non-real-time interaction that does not require immediate responses. Broadly, the differences between the two communication mechanisms can be distinguished by communication timing (real-time vs. flexible interaction), the nature of responses (immediate with instant clarification vs. thoughtful and reflective), and time coordination (scheduled vs. flexible with delayed feedback).

The usefulness of synchronous communication in comparison to asynchronous communication and traditional face-to-face courses was deeply discussed by (Offir et al., 2008). The authors found that asynchronous teaching methods do not foster a dialogue between teacher and student, and thus do not enable students to raise questions. Synchronous distance education methods are expected to assist students in assimilating the learning materials through in-depth discourse. The differences suggest the possibility of hybrid communication methods to compensate for each mechanism's shortfalls. Im and Lee (2003) suggest asynchronous discussion is likely related to task-oriented communication (topic-related discussions), while synchronous communication is more useful for promoting social interaction.

Communication Mode

Most postgraduate students perceive online learning as more convenient than traditional approaches since online learning promotes better student participation through group discussion or forums, enables the student to learn at their own pace, better access to information on the internet and improves self-learning. From the social or individual solving problems from the study of science that is the subject of study, low enthusiasm for learning, memorizing, and orientation on student attendance formalities (Sufirmansyah et al., 2021). Literature has also documented that ODL learning commonly relates to issues about demanding technology and infrastructure and the need for effective communication among the many stakeholders i.e., academia, student and postgraduate office; involved in the teaching and learning process (Choi et al., 2021a; Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020; Simamora, 2020; Sufirmansyah et al., 2021).

Communication Platform

Communication platforms refer to methods used to facilitate knowledge transfer. Within this background, the study focuses specifically on communication applications and video conferencing tools, as these are deemed essential components of an effective teaching and delivery mechanism in ODL.

Communication Application

The communication apps that include WhatsApp, Ding Talks, Telegram, WeChat, Messengers and Discord offer the capability for real-time communication, instant sharing of learning materials, and fostering collaboration among students and educators. These tools contribute to a more engaging and responsive learning environment of online distance learning. Adding to this (Choi et al., 2021b), messaging apps are commonly used for communication between students and faculties during non-class times on a more personal level that could minimise temporal barriers to education delivery. Using applications can integrate informal with formal learning activities to enhance the learning process. Nagaletchimee (2015) identified communication applications, i.e., WhatsApp, are used as an extended learning platform in a blended learning classroom and are highly acceptable by students mainly for reflection. However, these applications are often unsuitable for higher-order thinking skills such as reflection, in-depth discussions, or brainstorming. These are primarily due to their limited storage capacity, word count restrictions, and format constraints. Despite these limitations, communication apps offer significant advantages, including ease of use, accessibility, rapid feedback, a sense of belonging, high levels of interaction, and a secure environment (Gon & Rawekar, 2017). To compensate for this,

the likelihood of app integration and a combination of methods to compensate for their shortcomings (Nagaletchimee, 2015), are the way forward for effective online distance learning.

1. Video conferencing tools

Video conferencing tools are the pivotal tools that enable online distance learning, providing sharing of computer screens, web-based content or individual applications in real-time among networked computers (Suduc et al., 2009). From the perspective of ODL, video or web conferencing can be organized for online lectures and class discussions, conducting presentations in the forms of seminars and forums, conducting customer-relation support, and more recently, conducting online education (teaching and learning). Some of the used video conferencing tools facilitate real-time communication and information sharing. Commonly used web conferring tools include Google Meet, Microsoft Team, Webex, Google Classroom, and Ding Talk. These tools distinguish between technical features, education support, technical specifications, data rate requirements and capacity (Oloyede et al., 2022). Of these, Google Meet is considered more suitable for online distance learning mainly due to the specification that requires less RAM capacity, uses fewer data packages, can be easily accessible and has high interaction with other apps and cloud components (Oloyede et al., 2022; Sufirmansyah et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology refers to the principles and procedures of logical thought processes applied to a scientific investigation (Ahmed et al., 2016). Mechanism concerns the techniques which are available for data collection and analysis. In quantitative research, self-administered surveys are a common method of data collection. This approach involves respondents completing surveys independently without the presence of a researcher. For this research, the questionnaire survey was conducted by using self-administered surveys. The survey was delivered through online platforms (Google Forms) by email to the respondents between January and February 2023. This method is suitable for convenient sampling and can be useful for collecting quantitative data on numerous topics.

The respondents, divided into potential students and interested people, were required to answer the questionnaire survey. The potential students for this research would have Master's and Bachelor's degrees, while the interested people are from AP992 alumni, academia, and education agencies. The questionnaire was attached with a cover letter to inform the importance of the survey. The cover letter also informed us of the confidential nature of the study by ensuring anonymity. Respondents were invited through the WhatsApp platform, and the questionnaire form via Google Forms was emailed to them. The survey was divided into three (3) parts: 1) Profile of Respondents; 2) Potential Interest in ODL-based Mixed Program; and 3) Factor Considered to Pursue PhD. In addition, a pre-test/ pilot study was carried out with a few respondents to ensure the clarity and reliability of the survey items.

To perform a thorough data analysis involving descriptive statistics, observing main trends and ranking scores are important to determine. The data was analysed by using SPSS with descriptive statistics to get an overall sense of its distribution and tendencies. All the variables were ranked based on the mean score that provides the central value of the dataset to determine the importance of different scores or categories.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Profile of Respondents

Table 1. *Overall Profile of Respondents*

Respondent's Profile		Frequency (*f*)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	91	57.23
	Female	68	42.77
Total Gender		159	100
Nationality	China	8	5.03

	Indonesia	8	5.03
	Iran	1	0.63
	Malaysia	139	87.42
	Pakistan	1	0.63
	Thailand	1	0.63
	Yemen	1	0.63
Total Nationality		159	100
Education	Bachelor's Degree	29	18.24
	Master's Degree	86	54.09
	PhD	44	27.67
Total by Education Qualifications		159	100
Age Group	20-30 years	34	21.38
	31-40 years	72	45.28
	41-50 years	44	27.67
	51- 60 years	8	5.03
	60 years and above	1	0.64
Total by Age Group		159	100

In terms of gender distribution within the surveyed sample, 57.23% of respondents identify as female, while 42.77% identify as male the gender distribution is generally balanced. The data on nationality distribution among respondents underscores a notable concentration from Malaysia, comprising 87.42% of the sample. In comparison to the expected diversity seen in a nationally representative, the data show an overrepresentation of Malaysian respondents. The prevalence of advanced degrees in the surveyed population, with 54.09% holding master's degrees and 27.67% possessing PhDs. Given that the respondents primarily consist of academicians and potential PhD, this educational trend aligns with expectations with the anticipated predetermined criteria used to identify respondents.

Program Structure

1. Study mode

The survey results show a clear preference for full-time study. Among interested parties, 59.18% choose the full-time mode, and 62.73% of potential students also choose this mode, resulting in a total preference of 61.64%. In contrast, part-time study is preferred by 40.82% of interested parties and 37.27% of potential students, leading to an overall preference of 38.36%. This indicates that most respondents favour full-time study, suggesting that a full-time program might be more attractive with notable interest in part-time study.

2. PhD mode

The data reveals a clear preference for PhD study modes among respondents, with 46.94% of interested parties and 36.36% of potential students opting for full research, resulting in an overall preference of 39.62%. Conversely, 53.06% of interested parties and 63.64% of potential students prefer the mixed mode, leading to an overall preference of 60.38%. These findings indicate that most respondents favour a mixed mode and are more inclined towards this balanced approach, highlighting the importance of integrating both coursework and research components in PhD programs.

3. Preferred day and time

The table highlights key trends in the preferred days and times for participating in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) activities. Weekdays after office hours are the most favoured, with 84 individuals (52.83%) expressing interest, including 19 stakeholders (38.78%) and 65 prospective students (59.09%). The entire day on weekends is preferred by 72 individuals (45.28%), with 28 stakeholders (57.14%) and 44 prospective students (40.00%) choosing this option. Only one prospective student (0.63%) prefers weekdays during office hours, while flexible scheduling is the least preferred, with just two stakeholders (1.26%) showing interest and no prospective students indicating a preference. These

insights can guide educational institutions in tailoring ODL activities to align with participants' preferences better, enhancing engagement and participation.

Table 2. *PhD Program Structure by Study Mode, PhD Mode and Preferred Time*

Study Mode	Interested Party	(%)	Potential Student	(%)	Total	(%)
Full Time (3 years min to 6 years maximum)	29	59.18	69	62.73	98	61.64
Part Time (4 years minimum to 8 years maximum)	20	40.82	41	37.27	61	38.36
Total	49	100.00	110	100.00	159	100.00
PhD Mode	Interested Party	(%)	Potential Student	(%)	Total	(%)
Full Research (independent, supervised research project)	23	46.94	40	36.36	63	39.62
Mixed Mode (combination of coursework and research project)	26	53.06	70	63.64	96	60.38
Total	49	100.00	110	100.00	159	100.00
Preferred Day and Time	Interested Party	%	Potential Student	%	Total	%
Flexible time	2	4.08	0	0.00	2	1.26
Weekdays (after office hours)	19	38.78	65	59.09	84	52.83
Weekdays office hour	0	0.00	1	0.91	1	0.63
Weekend (Whole day)	28	57.14	44	40.00	72	45.28
Total	49	100.00	110	100.00	159	100.00

Communication Mechanism

1. Communication timing

Table 4 depicts the distribution of interested parties in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) interaction timing. For asynchronous mode, 30.61% of the interest parties, while there are 30.91% potential students, making up 30.81% of the overall possible student population, opting for the type of timing. On the contrary, the synchronous mode shows a higher count among interested parties, 69.39% of the total interest party and 69.09% of potential students, of the total of potential student that accounting for 69.18% of the overall count. The overall results indicate that 30.82% choose asynchronous timing, while 69.18% choose synchronous. A higher proportion of synchronous interactions facilitates more effective communication between lecturers and students. It also simplifies the arrangement of individual schedules, creating a more conducive online learning environment and reducing misunderstandings throughout the learning process.

Table 3. *Communication Mechanism for Online Distance Learning*

Communication Timing (CT)	Interested Party	%	Potential Student	%	Total	%
Asynchronous	15	30.61	34	30.91	49	30.82
Synchronous	34	69.39	76	69.09	110	69.18
Total	49	100.00	110	100.00	159	100.00
Communication Modes	Interested Party	%	Potential Student	%	Total	%
Blended Communication - combination of both modes	33	67.35	64	58.18	97	61.01
Conventional Learning (Classroom, Face to Face)	3	6.12	6	5.45	9	5.66
Open and Distance Learning (Fully online and offline)	13	26.53	40	36.36	53	33.33
Total	49	100.00	110	100.00	159	100.00
Communication Platform	Interested Party	%	Potential Student	%	Total	%
Ding Talk	1	1.12	0	0.00	1	0.32
Webex	21	23.60	39	17.26	60	19.05
Google Classroom	29	32.58	78	34.51	107	33.97
Zoom	17	19.10	52	23.01	69	21.90
Whats Apps	1	1.12	0	0.00	1	0.32
Microsoft Teams	20	22.47	57	25.22	77	24.44
Total	89	100.00	226	100.00	315	100.00

2. Communication mode

The data reveals clear preferences for delivery mode among respondents. A combination of conventional and online modes is favoured by 67.35% of interested parties and 58.18% of potential students, resulting in an overall preference of 61.01%. Meanwhile, fully online learning, or open and distance learning, attracts 26.53% of interested parties and 36.36% of potential students, leading to an overall preference of 33.33%. This suggests a strong interest in blended learning environments, which combine the flexibility of online distance learning with the integration of face-to-face learning.

3. Communication platform

The table outlines the distribution of respondents based on various ODL platforms and highlights the key preferences. Google Meet is the most popular, attracting 33.97% of respondents, Webex 28.25%, and Zoom 21.90%. Microsoft Teams also has a notable interest, with 24.44% of respondents considering it a viable option. Ding Talk and WhatsApp show minimal engagement, each garnering only one stakeholder's interest, representing 1.12% of total interest and 0.32% of the overall total. No potential students indicated interest in these platforms. These insights highlight Google Meet, Webex, and Zoom as the leading platforms for ODL activities, while Ding Talk and WhatsApp as the least preferred.

DISCUSSION

The discussion highlights two key components of conducting an ODL program: program structure and communication mechanisms. Existing literature indicates that the program structure significantly influences the choice of communication methods, making it essential to understand this relationship (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019; Offir et al., 2008). This understanding is crucial for assessing the program's effectiveness, impact on student satisfaction, and overall success (Choi et al., 2021; Gon &

Rawekar, 2017; Masalimova et al., 2022). By examining these factors, the findings offer valuable insights to guide the design of program structures and communication mechanisms for new PhD programs, particularly in environments like the study context, ensuring they align with students' needs and expectations.

The results demonstrate respondents' inclination towards full-time study among both groups. This may be due to factors such as shorter completion times (Berrocoso et al., 2020), increased opportunities for formal and informal meetings (Zhang, 2020), better networking and exposure to academia, higher involvement in research and teaching (Zhang, 2020), and clearer scholarly development goals (Paliktzoglou & Suhonen, 2011). These factors are essential for academic maturity, nurturing interest in research and shaping future academic careers. While full-time study is well accepted, offering flexible part-time options is crucial to accommodate students with other commitments (Lee, 2021; Paliktzoglou & Suhonen, 2011). By providing both full-time and part-time study options, institutions can cater to a broader range of students to maintain a sustainable financial sheet balance.

The trends of PhD mode preferences show interesting findings, whereas mixed mode received higher preferences than full research. Mixed-mode program offers structured modular that combines coursework and research, allowing students to benefit from both traditional approaches in conducting research and modular teaching. The data on preferred days and times for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) show that respondents favour courses scheduled on weekdays after office hours and on weekends to maximize participation and engagement. The lack of interest in flexible scheduling and weekday office hours indicates that participants prefer more structured times that align with typical work and study schedules, which may help them balance their educational commitments with other responsibilities (Lee, 2021; Paliktzoglou & Suhonen, 2011).

In communication, the data respondents are inclined to integrated communication mechanisms that combine the benefits of traditional and online approaches. Synchronous interaction and face-to-face teaching are more acceptable than asynchronous interaction and offline teaching. The higher count of individuals preferring synchronous interaction may be attributed to the immediate feedback and dynamic communication it offers, which can enhance the learning experience (dos Santos & Cechinel, 2019; Motteram, 2001; Simamora, 2020). This preference aligns with existing trends in digital education, where synchronous methods such as live lectures, webinars, and virtual classrooms have gained popularity. However, the asynchronous mode still holds significant value, particularly for potential students seeking flexibility in their learning schedules. Asynchronous learning allows students to access materials and complete tasks at their own pace (Tareen & Haand, 2020), which benefits those with time constraints or differing time zones (Masalimova et al., 2022). Although it is less preferred compared to synchronous learning in this context, the demand for asynchronous options reflects the diverse needs of ODL participants and the importance of offering flexible learning solutions. Thus, asynchronous will be more suitable for self-learning or task-orientation communication (Im & Lee, 2003). This suggests that ODL programs should continue to offer a blend of both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities.

The preference for blended communication as a communication mode aligns with findings by Choi et al. (2021), indicating that students appreciate all three delivery methods: conventional, online, and blended. This variety in delivery methods helped cater to different learning preferences and enhanced the overall accessibility of the courses (Choi et al., 2021). However, most respondents prefer a blended approach to learning, combining the best of both online and traditional communication methods. This approach allows students to access a wide range of resources and engage with their instructors and peers in various ways, making it an effective and flexible option for PhD programs (Oloyede et al., 2022; Suduc et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2020).

This brings to the discussion on the platform that can assist blended learning. The study provides a clear understanding of the stakeholders' preferences about the ODL platform for effective online learning delivery. Google Meet is notable for its smooth integration with Google Workspace, affordability, and intuitive, making it an ideal option for existing users or those looking for a simple and cost-effective

alternative. Thus, in certain contexts, particularly regarding service coverage, Google is considered to have broader access compared to other search engines. This makes it the most preferred search engine and online work platform. The preference for WhatsApp and other communication tools is lower mainly due to the limitations of the tools, primarily due to their limited storage capacity, word count restrictions, and format constraints. Therefore, Google Workspace/Classroom and Microsoft Teams are teaching platforms that are more suitable for formal instruction and formal learning, whilst messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, and Ding Talk are extended learning platforms, with most students preferring them for reflections (Gon & Rawekar, 2017; Nagaletchimee, 2015; Oloyede et al., 2022). The way forward is the likelihood of combining platform and application to compensate for each communication tool's shortcomings (Nagaletchimee, 2015).

Observing trends across the data reveals significant patterns in the respondents' preferences in the ODL PhD Program. Respondents are predominantly working professionals, most holding a master's degree and aged 35 or above, seeking further study for career advancement. Given this context, the respondents prefer to finish their studies on time or at minimal possible time. Due to their commitment to work, respondents require close guidance to monitor research milestones and update knowledge in the subject matters of conducting research. This need for flexibility is reflected in their preference for attending weekday classes after office hours and for blended learning, which allows a mix of online, distance, and offline learning. Additionally, respondents tend to favour synchronous learning, as it provides quick feedback from lecturers—an important factor given their work and family commitments.

CONCLUSION

Over the years, Online Distance Learning (ODL) has become increasingly accepted, and its application is becoming unavoidable as universities strive for financial sustainability and broader student enrolment. While ODL is more common in undergraduate programs, application in postgraduate programs is limited. Therefore, this research seeks to address the lack of documentation on the acceptance of ODL in postgraduate programs by exploring the preferences of potential students and stakeholders regarding program structure, study modes, communication methods, and platforms used in delivering these programs.

This study applied self-administered online surveys to gather data among potential respondents. The survey was conducted via Google Forms between January and February 2023 and yielded 159 valid respondents. The study has identified a preference for full-time study over part-time mode, whereas mixed mode received higher preferences than full research. The data on preferred days and times for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) show that respondents favour courses scheduled on weekdays after office hours and on weekends to maximize participation and engagement. In communication, an integrated mechanism that combines the benefits of traditional and online approaches is preferable. Synchronous interaction and face-to-face teaching are more acceptable than asynchronous interaction and offline teaching. The data reveals clear preferences for delivery mode among respondents.

This suggests a strong interest in blended learning environments, which combine the flexibility of online distance learning with the integration of face-to-face learning. This study contributes significantly to broader theories of flexible and distance education by emphasizing the areas of student-centred learning, and by identifying specific preferences and mechanisms that enhance ODL. The study reinforces the need for learner-centric approaches in education. This aligns with broader theories advocating flexibility and personalized learning pathways to meet diverse student needs. In addition, it also significantly influences postgraduate program design in enhanced flexibility for students: As an actionable recommendation for the Malaysian higher education context, postgraduate syllabi, particularly for mixed-mode programs, could adopt a hybrid model approach tailored to local needs. These programs should offer flexible credit intakes, modular course structures, and blended learning options that combine online and face-to-face components. Such flexibility would enable students to balance their studies with work and family commitments more effectively.

Additionally, flexible schedules combined with comprehensive coursework could enhance retention and improve completion rates. The findings of this study are most applicable to educational environments similar to Malaysia, given that most respondents were local. Future research could benefit from incorporating a more diverse range of respondents from various localities. Additionally, it would be valuable to explore communication mechanisms, teaching management systems, cultural and other factors influencing the teaching environment and the quality of graduates.

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