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Reaching Out to Students-in-Need through Online Counseling Blog

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic leading to restricted movement control has seen the educational institutions quickly adopting the online-distance learning approach. Students and academicians must adopt the skills of conducting classes online. The lecturers noted that not all students cope well with distance learning, and learning from home provide different kinds of stress on students. After a semester of noting the challenges that students came across with ODL and confirming the need from students' need-assessment survey, the counselling lecturers have come up with an online method to reach out to students in distress. Thus, the creation of the counselling blog is an initiative taken by the counselling lecturers to provide students with a venue to read about self-help tips and information about counselling. The blog has several headings that students can delve into if they want to search more on briefs about counselling, activities, websites, and contacts of professional helps. There is also a venue for chatting online with a lecturer on duty, and students can write in anonymously to share their life experiences. Early response from students showed encouraging and positive response where they applauded the attractive designs and contents of the blog. It is recommended that such step is taken by other educational institutions in the effort of assisting students at the faculty level before they are referred to professional help, if in need.

1. Introduction

Malaysia strives to embrace and achieve Goal 3 of United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for every citizen at all ages. However, during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, mental health of university students has been greatly affected. A recent survey by U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that seventy-five percent of young adults aged 18-24 indicated at least one negative mental health symptom, of which twenty-five percent reported suicidal ideation [1]. The National College Health Assessment reported that one quarter of students were diagnosed with mental illness, about seventy percent reported being overwhelmed and sixty percent felt very lonely [2]. Under critical and disrupted situations, students tend to be less motivated in academics, having to learn autonomously when forced to go home and away from campus life [3]. Another study on student well-being found that 25% reported anxiety symptoms caused by worries about academic, economic and personal issues caused by the pandemic [4]. Due to the pressing need to elevate the experience of stress caused by the pandemic, Grubric,

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Badovinac and Johri [5] urged that measures be taken to help at-risk students manage their mental health

The educational institutions around the globe were seriously affected during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Schools and universities were closed, and students were forced to learn from home. University students had to leave campus, go home and continue classes online. This sudden change had caused tremendous stress upon students who were taken off-guard to become independent learners, at the same time managing the home environment which certainly may not be conducive to a few. Experts and survey on mental health have found worrying high percentage of increase in depression, anxiety and stress, causing insomnia, troubled thoughts and worrying [6]. The American College Health Association pointed out that even under normal situation; university students are plagued with psychological and academic distress, what more during the pandemic when they were forced to be away from peers and adopt online-distance learning approaches [7].

Teletherapy is defined as speech, occupational, and mental health therapy services delivered online through high-resolution, live video conferencing [8]. It is also known as online therapy, e-therapy, or video therapy, as long as it is delivered through a virtual platform. The sessions are conducted using the same process as traditional therapy sessions except for the fact that the therapist and the client are not in the same room. Evans and Hawkins [9] believed that with the advent of online counseling services as an innovative therapeutic medium, mental health counselors should consider how such therapeutic conditions can be fostered in an online environment. Numerous researches have been done to explore the availability of online interventions [10], [11]. Online counseling, or also called telepsychology, telepsychiatry and tele-mental-health, has gained acceptance due to the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic, forcing people to sit at home and conduct non-face-to-face communications in many aspects of life. For instance, Kluger [12] reported in TIME that the American Psychiatric Association surveyed its members in middle of May 2020 to determine how often held tele-psych sessions before and after the pandemic. It was found that before the pandemic, only 2.1% reported using tele-psych 76-100% of the time whereas after the outbreak, up to 84.7% resort to online sessions.

Online sessions can be done synchronously or asynchronously [13]. Synchronous sessions would allow counselor and client to meet face-to-face using any available virtual platform such as Skype, Google-meet, Webex and even mobile gadgets like Whatsapp or telegram videos. Using this virtual environment, real-time counseling sessions can be conducted quite successfully. Using asynchronous tele-counselling, clients are provided or directed to interventions or learning materials which they can use in their own free time and at their own pace. This is where a counselling blog designed for a specific target user is crucial in order to offer users with potential venue to guide them when in stress.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has caused dramatic change in the teaching and learning process of students at the faculty. Being forced to undergo the movement control orders beginning March 2020, student were sent home and proceed with classes using online distance learning (ODL). Many personal and academic stresses result from issues related to internet accessibility, challenges of distance learning, being independent learners and family problems. Home environment appears to not always be conducive for learning. It became apparent after a while when some unfortunate students shared glimpses of stories about parents having marital problems, parents having negative relationship with the children, limited space environment, hostile environment, sibling rivalry, and loneliness.

There is an urgent need to reach out and help students who experience stress during the remote learning period. The researchers who are counselling lecturers at the faculty were concerned with the well-being of students who are not present physically on campus but may be having problem at home during the distance learning period. Such students in need may not seek help, or are slow in identfying whom or where to seek help. Thus the researchers decided on finding a way to reach out and promote themselves to students. Not seeing them on campus has made helping students with mental health

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issues challenging due to them not communicating to academic staff as well as inability for them to seek professional help from counsellors on campus. Therefore the counselling lecturers took an initiative to create a blog that can be a venue for students to get a sense of we-ness and obtain information relevant to their mental well-being. The initial purpose of developing the blog is not so much as to conduct online counselling, but more as asynchronous appraoch to offer counseling help for those in need. Hopefully by knowing where to get relevant information about mental health issues, students will not be withdrwan into their own distress. Instead, the blog acts as a reaching-out tool to tell students that the faculty cares and are willing to help anytime. This paper reports the systematic process of conducting action research based on the need to find solutions on how to help students in distress during online distance learning.

2. Methodology

The process that led to the creation of the blog used the general principles of practical action research when practitioners identify a problem and are committed to try out a solution using systematic research steps [14]. They followed the four basic stages of action research. The first step involved identifying the research problem which concerned with students being away from campus have no venue to seek help from the faculty, making students feel alone and not coping well with their stress. This problem was voiced out in coordinators' meetings and through informal sharing with lecturers. The counselling lecturers were encouraged to find ways to reach out to students-in-need. The second step involved obtaining the necessary information to answer the question. A short survey to determine the necessity to gauge students' stress level was conducted. A quick interview with the Deputy of Dean (Academic Affairs) was also carried out.After analyzing and interpreting the information that was gathered, finally the researchers arrived at the fourth step of action research, which is developing the action. Their plan to create a counseling blog was deemed as timely and very much supported.

The researchers followed in general the ADDIE model in an attempt to develop an effective and attractive blog. This model is traditionally used by instructional designers that gives flexible guidelines through 5 steps: analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation. The analysis phase could be combined with the first step of action research, where the need was confirmed, target audience was determined, purpose of blog was specified. The next design stage specified the blog platform to be used. The researchers were not IT-savvy nor experts in instructional technology. Based on the two younger researchers who were more familiar with social media tools, and with the help of research assistants, the medium for the blog was specified. In the third phase of development, the researchers decided on the contents of the blogs, find materials and submitted to the assistants who upload and make the layout more colorful and interesting. The blog went through several adjustment, retunig and redesigning in terms of materials, layout, fonts, colors and images used. Finally when the blog was ready to be tested, the researchers were excited to reach the fourth stage of implementation. The blog was test-run by the researchers and assistants, They discussed what more need to be changed or modified before the actual presentation to target users. When everyone in the team was satisfied with the blog, it was time to show-case the blog to the faculty students. A post was shared across student groups telegram, announcing the availability of the blog and providing the link for students to visit and give their first impressions to it. The first round feedback was analyzed to guide the researchers on how to improve the blog in future.

3. Results

A total of 132 undergraduate students responded to the need analysis survey, where 25 (18.9%) respondents were males and 107 (81.1%) were females. They ranged from 20 to 30 years old. In obtaining information about the general assumption that students were having mental health issues

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during the online distance learning period, a question asked to what extent students experienced stress during the recent semester. The results showed 3 (2.2%) reported no stress, 33 (24.8%) experienced little stress, 64 (48.1%) claimed moderate stress and 30 (22.6%) ticked high stress.

Table 1: Sources of Stress

Source of stress	Mean
Academic	1.98
IT facilities	1.57
Personal issues	1.55
Financial	1.46
Family	1.31
Home	1.17
Peers	1.02

Table 1 shows the mean ratings for sources of stress that students rated on a scale from 0= no stress at all, 1 = a little stressful, 2 = moderately stressful, 3 = very stressful. It can be seen that the highest source of stress was academic (mean = 1.98), followed by IT facilities (mean = 1.57), personal issues (mean = 1.55), financial (mean = 1.46), family (mean = 1.31) home (1.17), and lastly peers (mean = 1.02). On whether there need to be a clear process to help students in need, 77 (58.3%) said yes, 49 (37.1%) said maybe and 6 (4.5%) said no need. Another question asked which mode would they prefer for a counselling session. Majority chose either face-to-face or online (83, 62.9%), 28 (21.2%) preferred face-to-face, while 27(20.5%) preferred online. In terms of determining whether the blog is a needed platform, 112 (86%) said yes and 18 (14%) said maybe. Nobody answered no. The respondents gave suggestions on the topics and materials that they felt should be included in the blog. In a short interview with the Deputy Dean of Academic Affairs, she applauded the initiative taken and confirmed that it was timely to create the blog to assist students with mental health issues especially when they are not on campus and have to cope with distance online learning.

The blog was designed with attractive features and colourful headings, subheadings used. Figures 1 and Figure 2 show a snapshot of the main pages of the blog. There are seven main headings beginning with the welcoming page, brief details about the facilitators, brief explanation about what counselling is about, tips and links to self-help websites, links to professional sites or numbers, and a column to submit a short story if they want to share their experiences. The languages used are both Malay language and English. This was seen as appropriate since counselling is best conducted using the mother-tongue, but English is also a second language in the country, especially it is the main academic language of the university.

An initial survey to rate the newly created blog received positive responses from 22 students who visited it. Hundred percent said the blog is a good initiative and beneficial to students. Twenty-one students (95.5%) rated the subtopics as relevant; navigation bars are easy to use. Twenty students (90.9%) viewed the links to other websites and main topics as suitable, making them want to take actions. Nineteen (86.4%) said the blog is attractive and motivates them to find out more. Slightly lower ratings were given to graphic and colour (81.8%) as well as main page and ability to motivate them to keep viewing the pages (77.3%). Since no professional bloggers or graphic designers were included in the process of developing this blog, it is satisfactory for the researchers to have conquered such a challenge of creating the blog from zero.

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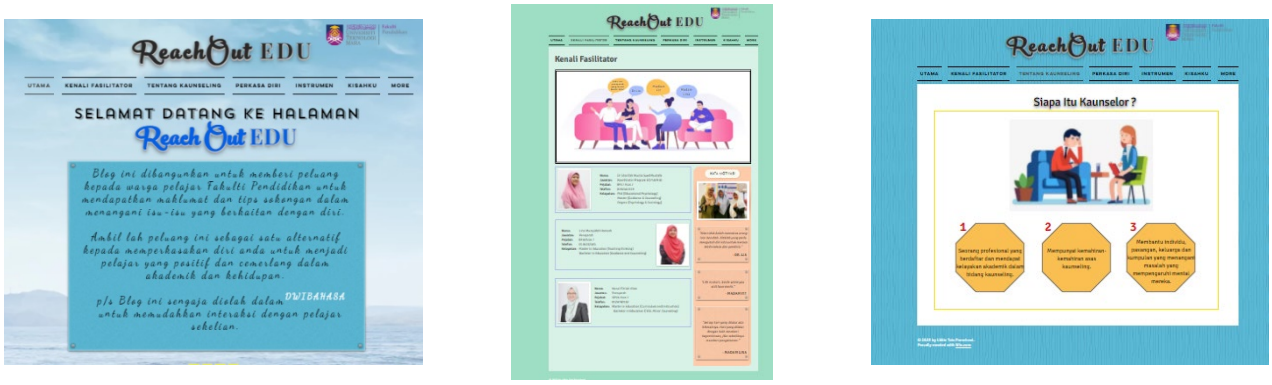

Figure 1: The welcoming page and brief details about the helpers and briefs about counselling

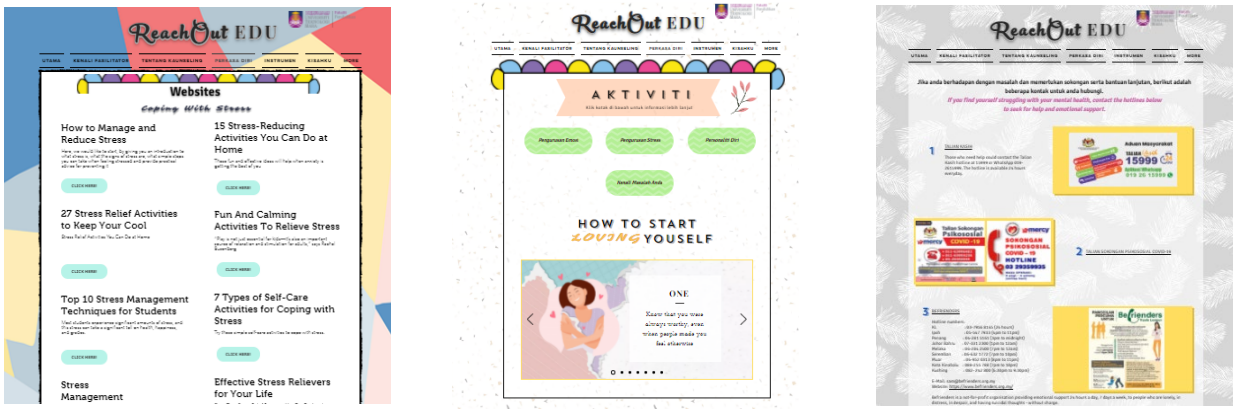

Figure 2: Links to websites, activities and hotlines

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Indeed, the blog is not outstandingly excellent or strikingly impressive, but the initiative taken by the researchers who are not professional bloggers can be applauded. Admittedly there are still many more information and added features to be inserted in the blog as updating the blog is a continuous process. The step taken by counselling lecturers to create a blog was seen by many parties as a good and timely initiative, in view of providing students at home with access to information and tips when dealing with mental health issues. The blog is an initiative to provide students in the faculty with their own faculty blog – more intimate and create a sense of belonging as well as we-ness.

Learning from home is not necessarily a conducive environment for some students, especially those who faced internet facilities and family issues. Faculty members and professional helpers nearest to the students should look into the well-being of students who might face stress when doing online distance learning. Most of the time, it is quite difficult for the students/clients to seek face to face help from a counsellor because they regard counsellor as a stranger and thus are not willing to fully self-disclose. However, through this online platform, students/clients have the opportunity to seek help via online and remain anonymous. With the information or details of counsellors in the blog, students are also aware of where to get help from faculty members when they are in need.

Online counselling can be the trend in upcoming years due to the restricted movement control order where people cannot go out due to the pandemic Covid-19. Many aspects of life activities have to be conducted via online means, including counselling. It remains to be seen whether online counselling will still remain popular or continuously preferred after the pandemic is over: will clients resort to face-to-face counselling, in favour of physical meeting and non-virtual interaction?

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