

Research Paper

Lecturers' Well-Being in Malaysia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Retrospective Study

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Abstract: The recent COVID-19 pandemic inflicted wide-ranging impacts on all sectors globally. Malaysia was no exception. The purpose of this retrospective study is to explore the well-being status of Malaysian university lecturers who conducted online teaching activities during the pandemic and the effective coping strategies they adopted to maintain their well-being. This study adopted a phenomenological approach and collected qualitative data from five lecturers of a private university in Selangor through structured interviews over a period of four weeks. The findings of the study imply that the participants embraced a state of sustained positivity and high resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants collectively stated that the positive factors that improved their happiness during the pandemic were the effective application of new teaching technologies in online teaching, frequent social interactions with colleagues, and high student engagement in class. Based on findings, higher education institutions should support lecturers in meeting three significant needs: strong self-confidence and high adaptability, overcoming burnout and high pressure and improving the quality of teaching.

Keywords: Well-being, higher education, COVID-19 pandemic, phenomenology, Malaysia

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Introduction

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 significantly changed the lives of educators as global lockdowns disrupted the usual classroom experience (UNESCO, 2023). In Malaysia, the government implemented a series of intermittent Movement Control Orders (MCOs) from March 8, 2020, to April 1, 2022, to contain the spread of the pandemic and to minimise fatalities (MDBC, 2020). As a result, educational institutions, including schools and universities, had to continue their teaching and learning activities through virtual means. To date, no other global crises have had such a strong impact on higher education institutions, especially on the mental health of lecturers and the well-being of teachers compared to the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Nurunnabi et al., 2021).

Teacher well-being (TWB) is a prerequisite and success indicator in the educator profession that helps teachers fulfil their obligations well and provide meaning to their work. Teacher well-being can be attributed to a variety of indicators and factors. Typically, positive factors (such as positive emotions, satisfaction, or self-efficacy beliefs) and negative factors (such as negative emotions, stress, or complaints) are considered determinants. Since positive factors and negative factors coexist, teacher happiness can be defined through the relationship between the two, which can be understood as a “positive imbalance”, that is, positive factors are dominant over negative factors. The greater the difference between the positive and negative factors, the higher the level of happiness.

Unfortunately, high stress levels caused by low well-being is a problem that has been plaguing the Malaysian education industry. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, research on teacher happiness in Malaysia generally focused on the basic education stage, and the increase in workload was found to be the main cause of increased teacher stress and lower teacher happiness (Dabrowski, 2020). In addition, another study (Zarin et al., 2022) pointed out that the teaching profession in Malaysia has always been under great pressure due to many sources of stress. These include teaching unmotivated students, classroom management issues, educational policy changes, teacher evaluation, work pressure, reduced teacher status, administrative demands, as well as conflict and ambiguity in teacher's roles. As a result, teachers often struggle to carry out their job effectively. In another study involving 207 primary school teachers, Ambotang and Bayong (2018) found that high workload and the resulting job responsibilities and performance commitments were the main reasons for low well-being, high stress, and high turnover.

The shift towards digital learning during the pandemic imposed a lot of pressure on the lecturers of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. As the structure of the Malaysian higher education revolves around face-to-face teaching and learning, its prohibition during the pandemic brought about an unprecedented predicament for all HEIs. Although there has been a steady expansion of digital equipment in

Malaysia's learning and teaching environment, lecturers were not prepared at all when they had to suddenly and quickly replace traditional face-to-face teaching with remote online teaching. Often, when teachers do not obtain enough technical and resource support for remote teaching, they are not able to teach and successfully complete any online courses. This leads to a higher workload and corresponding high pressure, and ultimately negative impacts on the personal well-being of teachers as well as their work satisfaction and interpersonal relationships (Alves et al., 2020). Similarly, when the professional performance of lecturers suffers, their positive emotions, engagement, interpersonal relationships, meaning, achievement and other psychological dimensions related to happiness will be affected.

Ultimately, an overall decrease in teacher well-being may lead to a decrease in the teaching quality, that is, a decrease in teachers' ability to provide effective, high-quality instruction (Chan & Lim, 2023). According to Hascher et al. (2021), teacher well-being is primarily a function of positive emotions and perceptions of the profession. By supporting their optimal functioning and commitment to schools, there is a lower risk of teachers leaving the profession. However, there has been very little concern about the well-being of Malaysian lecturers during the pandemic as existing studies have only focused on the positive aspects of teacher well-being, such as engagement, positive emotions, or life satisfaction (Zulkifli et al., 2022).

A number of research gaps were identified with regard to this topic which can be summarised as follows: (1) Many current studies have basically discussed the comprehensive impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on university lecturers, but there is still a lack of research on their happiness from the positive psychology dimension; (2) The current need to construct effective models of lecturer well-being based on positive psychology dimensions is moderately discussed to provide support for summative research within higher education institutions in the wider Malaysian context; (3) The topic of well-being discussed in previous studies mostly covered the perspectives of students in higher education institutions, while the well-being of lecturers was neglected.

To address the aforementioned research gaps, the authors reviewed and analysed Malaysian lecturers' personal experiences and concepts regarding well-being during the pandemic, and the personal and professional challenges they overcame. In other words, how the crisis and resulting online teaching affected lecturers' well-being and the best coping strategies that were adopted. Therefore, the research question was formulated as follows: How did online teaching impact the well-being of Malaysian lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Phenomenology was employed as the research design to collect and analyse the experiences of Malaysian lecturers. This study hopes to support lecturers in coping with the challenges of future changes in online teaching and hybrid teaching models

in a balanced and stress-free manner, in particular those involving mental health and well-being.

Literature Review

Malaysian Higher Education Sector and COVID-19 Pandemic

During the Movement Control Order (MCO) period from March 18, 2020, till 2022, to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the higher education sector operated remotely and only gradually opened after March 1, 2022 (Bernama, 2022). According to Azman and Abdullah (2020), the mission of universities in Malaysia during this period was to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of students and staff while providing emergency assistance to students in their studies.

As part of their distance learning programmes or courses, most Malaysian HEIs have already adopted remote teaching to replace face-to-face teaching. When the MCO was announced, the Ministry of Higher Education and HEIs worked together to enable and support remote teaching and learning to ensure studies were not disrupted. Some administrative changes included moving semester breaks to the first two weeks of the first MCO. During the two-week semester break, school management held numerous meetings, reviewed courses to adapt to the new requirements of online teaching, and conducted training for staff and students via Microsoft Teams (Nassr et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2021).

However, although most Malaysian universities had already implemented blended and remote learning, the most obvious challenge at that time was the digital divide between urban and rural areas (Mustapha et al., 2021). Yusuf (2020) explained that online teaching instructions such as uploaded recorded lectures and presentation slides, and the use of forums, instant messaging, and Microsoft Teams during class requires instructors and students to have timely and easy access to the Internet and digital devices. Both studies contended that the prerequisite for realising an effective teaching space with digital devices similar to that of face-to-face classes, is for universities to support students and educators with low Internet coverage and lacking digital devices. This will avoid the psychological problems of isolation, anxiety, and burnout caused as a result of unreliable networks and lack of equipment.

In their work on online teaching in Malaysian HEIs, Sundarasan et al. (2020) found that most universities replaced summative assessments with formative assessments, and learning that required physical interactions, live demonstrations or laboratory work, were suspended. This resulted in students becoming frustrated and burdened with ongoing assessment tasks and components in an online environment, minus any interaction with instructors or peers. Additionally, as highlighted earlier, the lack of reliable Internet connections as well as access to digital technology and equipment for online learning made it difficult for students in remote or poor areas to keep up with remote learning.

It is worth noting that the above-mentioned challenges faced by students in the context of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have inadvertently affected students' physical and mental health. Kamaludin and Sundarasan (2023) contended that most university students experienced low levels of well-being due to heavy academic workload amidst very tight and busy schedules, which ultimately led to burnout and fatigue. Some students displayed signs of physical pain and illness, such as headaches and high blood pressure. These high-stress manifestations disrupt the students' learning progress and the accumulated stress can make it difficult for them to recover.

We can conclude that the implementation of remote teaching by universities in Malaysia during the pandemic unearthed many potential challenges and was a cause of stress and anxiety among students, to the extent that their physical and mental health may have been affected. However, the effect on lecturers' well-being has been left largely unexplored in the context of higher education institutions in Malaysia. Only a study by Arumugam et al. (2021) looked at this aspect and found five main challenges: (1) isolation caused by lack of effective interaction; (2) lack of motivation to teach online due to inability to discuss and solve problems with colleagues; (3) technical difficulties with low-quality online teaching tools and environments; (4) resource consumption caused by readjusting to online teaching; and (5) imbalance between work and personal life caused by the blurred boundaries of the living and working environment.

Teacher Well-being

Teacher well-being (TWB) is recognised as a key issue for schools and society and is at the heart of teachers' lives. It is viewed as a dimension related to teaching effectiveness, student outcomes, and educational governance (Panadero et al., 2022). High levels of TWB can help schools operate stably and improve teachers and students' work performance and self-efficacy, while low levels is considered an obstacle to school improvement and educational reform, which may lead to poor teacher and student performance (Viac & Fraser, 2020). It is worth noting that teacher well-being was once generally regarded as the opposite of burnout and stress, and researchers often regarded TWB as an important predictor of stress management, work-related anxiety or depression, and burnout (Cavioni et al., 2020; Hascher et al., 2021).

As a multidimensional mental health construct, TWB is a condition that can be described by a variety of indicators and factors. Combining the theories of the above researchers, the author defined teacher happiness in this study as an intricate dynamic system constructed by teachers through the complex interplay of environment, place, activities and psychological resources (including interpersonal relationships). Teacher well-being changes and flows over time. It fluctuates in

personal and professional lives based on the interaction between the individual and the environment, allowing teachers to respond to a given environment in a way that puts them in a comfortable, physical and mental health, and a positive mindset. In this state, teachers can gain an effective sense of meaning and satisfaction in life and work.

For university lecturers, a profession that is under tremendous pressure, it is particularly important to maintain professional enthusiasm, positive outlook and a sense of well-being. Rusu and Colomeischi (2020) found that this work has strong self-fulfilling and altruistic characteristics, driven more by an intrinsic motivation. Lecturers not only focus on their own professional development and realisation of value goals, but also on helping students improve their personality and promote socialisation. Because society has high expectations for the personal integrity of lecturers, attention to faculty well-being is particularly important. For lecturers, emotional job demands such as teaching resources, peer support, administrative support, and maintaining relationships with colleagues and students can increase their well-being to a certain extent. At the same time, teaching load, research demands, new challenges as a result of modern educational technology and innovations, increased administrative workload, unmet work demands and lack of work support may all become stressors that can threaten their well-being (Han et al., 2020). In other words, teacher happiness is the prerequisite and indicator for lecturers to successfully realise the meaning of the teaching profession. It symbolises the main positive emotions and perceptions about the professional and personal work of university lecturers, supporting their optimal functioning and commitment to the school.

According to Daumiller et al. (2020), university lecturers reported higher levels of job satisfaction when fulfilling their job responsibilities and believe they can complete tasks that require more experience. However, lecturers often believe that due to their limited work experience, unstable work contracts, and insufficient use of their skills, they are prone to depression, tremendous pressure, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and corresponding health problems. Furthermore, difficulties in maintaining work-life balance have become a major source of stress for lecturers (Fontinha et al., 2019). Lecturers are the core asset of every academic institution, undertaking major tasks in teaching, research and service activities towards the realisation of the university's mission. Furthermore, they carry the responsibility of building the next generation of leaders and shaping the society (Pekrun, 2019). Thus, for organisations such as schools and universities, teacher well-being is crucial to lower educator turnover and attrition.

To sum up, the authors believe that teacher happiness or well-being encapsulates the positive emotions generated by individual lecturers through the direct subjective interpretation and interaction of cognitive, emotional, health and social factors related to their lives and careers, status and reactions. Thus, in this process, lecturer self-efficacy and trustworthy colleagues are positively related to enthusiasm and satisfaction and negatively related to anxiety and depression. Additionally, the authors

surmise that teachers who are able to effectively manage and respond to emotional situations may actually experience higher levels of self-efficacy and improved teacher-student relationships because of their ability to overcome these challenges.

Seligman's PERMA Model of Happiness

The framework for this retrospective study was grounded on the theoretical perspective of positive psychology and Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of happiness. According to Seligman (2018), positive psychology attempts to understand how people grow and achieve. It examines practices and methods that lead to optimal functioning, with a focus on enhancing the positive aspects of the human experience. The PERMA model of happiness is based on positive psychology and considers many aspects of personal life that help define subjective happiness so that individuals can evaluate their own life happiness and satisfaction, and ultimately, choose factors and activities that support it.

According to Seligman (2011), the five constructs of PERMA are the cornerstones of life satisfaction and happiness, and the goal of this theoretical model based on subjective well-being is to construct interventions and effective feedback information to help measure and improve individual's happiness. These five thematic constructs are discussed next.

(1) Positive Emotions. This includes all pleasant emotions such as comfort, joy and happiness. They often occur in the workplace, can help a person flourish, and can be taught and improved (Inigo & Raufaste, 2019). Happy individuals are the result of the complex interplay between their positive emotions, positive behaviours, positive thoughts, and need satisfaction stimulated by conscious positive activities. Positive emotions are often temporary and may change significantly depending on the situation and the activities a person engages in over a short period of time.

(2) Engagement. This generally refers to the sense of fulfilment that occurs when people are immersed in meaningful activities and pursue achievable goals, such as overcoming adversity (Seligman, 2011). Research by Dreer (2022) showed that teachers are more likely to feel happiness and job satisfaction when they can commit to providing favourable conditions for student learning, thereby increasing student engagement and helpful feedback. When teachers achieve their goals by conveying a positive attitude and self-efficacy to students, there is a positive relationship between high student engagement and high teacher job satisfaction. Additionally, some negative emotions (such as frustration or failure) will always arise during participation, and PERMA advocates accepting these emotions and using them in effective ways to increase well-being. So, the determination to keep trying after failing is inherent in this part as well.

(3) Relationship. Refers to the way two or more people connect or relate with each other, including recognition and support, as well as the sense of satisfaction. As

an important factor in improving satisfaction and happiness, interpersonal relationships are often the most effective tool for coping with stress and negative emotions, and have a strong and lasting positive impact on self-esteem, coping ability, and stress levels (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Teaching, as a profession that requires a high degree of social participation, often requires effective professional relationships to succeed, by meeting the needs for belonging, love, and social support.

(4) Meaning. Seligman (2011) described it as an individual's sense that they belong to and serve something greater than themselves. A meta-analysis of the causes of teacher attrition by Madigan and Kim (2021) demonstrated that over time, most teachers need to derive professional meaning from their own intrinsic motivation in order to enhance job satisfaction as well as combat burnout and job dissatisfaction. On the contrary, when teachers think that their work is meaningless, they will not be able to derive a pleasant emotional state from their work, and will eventually leave their profession.

(5) Achievement. It is defined as the feeling of progress towards a personal goal or the achievement of tangible results, expressed as a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in any given area (Seligman, 2011). Although achievement requires sustained effort and active work, it can influence a teacher's commitment and help him or her maintain high levels of job satisfaction and motivation, perseverance and a sense of mastery. Furthermore, maximising effort can lead to a sense of accomplishment even if the expected goals or results are not achieved (Rhoads et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study using Seligman's theoretical model is to discover skills and strengths that can increase lecturers' life satisfaction. The study looked at lecturers' positive emotions and activities, and reviewed the coping strategies used to maintain their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study posits that lecturers' well-being may be enhanced by their own life experiences that contribute to their personal abilities in navigating the pandemic. In this way, the focus is on the positive aspects of lecturers' mental health, rather than stress, burnout and other negative aspects that past studies centred on. Because the model supports a positive psychology approach to investigating lecturer well-being in different teaching contexts and its relationship to teachers' life experiences, it can serve as a theoretical framework for this study to shed light on the well-being of Malaysian lecturers during the pandemic.

Methodology

Participants

Five participants who were lecturers at a private HEI in Selangor, Malaysia were selected for this retrospective study. The participants generally had three or more

years of teaching experience in higher education and they have been teaching at the School of Education, Taylor's University from the early stages of COVID-19 (January 2020) till today. All the participants have conducted online teaching or hybrid mode teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, for at least 4 months, and have covered at least three pedagogy courses. All the study participants responded well and answered the interview questions. The recorded interviews were first transcribed by the author before being reviewed to assign codes and systematically organised into themes. Finally, the authors reviewed and refined each theme to determine its reliability and validity.

Data Saturation

The interviews with the participants were conducted in October and November 2023 through the Zoom application. First, the participants were sent an email invitation which provided an overview of the study and a consent form. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, as well as their rights to anonymity, the right to withdraw from participation, and the right to read the final manuscript before submission. After signing the informed consent form, the five lecturers participated in semi-structured interviews conducted in English, which lasted 40 to 50 minutes for each participant. The interviewer collected data on the participants' backgrounds and asked questions based on Seligman's PERMA well-being model (2011) about their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted their well-being. The video interviews were recorded and transcribed into Word documents by the second author. After each interview, all the transcribed documents from the participants were sent back to them to ensure that all their responses were captured completely and accurately.

All the authors were familiar with the coding of transcripts following the thematic analysis model suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author coded the transcripts using the thematic framework based on Seligman's PERMA model of well-being (2011). The coding process helped to identify participants' perceptions of well-being as reflected in their lived and academic experiences during the pandemic. When analysing the data, the author used Amedeo Giorgi's 5-step descriptive phenomenological analysis method (Giorgi et al., 2017) to ensure that the textual data collected at the end of all interview sessions was accurately broken down from complete descriptions into codes. This ensured the potential to generate thematic structures that reveal the meaning of lived experiences and eliminate biases from previous research (Gallagher, 2012). To improve the validity and reliability of the analysis, it was then reviewed by the second author and no changes were made to the recorded and transcribed data.

Results and Discussion

Grounded on Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model as the theoretical framework, the data analysis assessed the components of the participants’ well-being and proactive coping strategies. Seligman posits that the model’s five pillars that help build the overall well-being can be defined and measured independently of each other. The analysis generated these five themes in order: (1) Positive emotion; (2) Engagement; (3) Relationships; (4) Meaning; (5) Accomplishment.

Data from the interview transcripts were deciphered into units of meaning for well-being and categorised into thematic codes according to Seligman’s PERMA model (Table 1). Across the themes, the authors categorised teacher well-being as a supportive network from a positive psychology perspective. Among them, positive teacher-student interaction, supportive social interaction from colleagues and the university, and the ability to adapt to the new teaching environment were the three common dimensions among the five themes. These aspects supported lecturers in combating the stressors associated with the unprepared move to online teaching, namely mental burnout, high stress, and confusion. We can say that these three dimensions not only served as sources of teacher well-being in crisis situations like the pandemic, but are actual representations of the subsequent positive psychological effects as a result of teacher well-being.

Table 1. Summary of data analysis results

Themes	Positive emotion	Engagement	Relationships	Meaning	Accomplishment
Codes	Mental and physical health	Participate actively	Work independently	Share knowledge	Best Lecturer Award
	Communication	High student engagement	Positive lecturer-students relationship	Provide high-quality learning experiences	Student academic success
	Enthusiasm	Promote interaction	Toward building a researchers’ community	Strong determination	Effective academic achievement
	Environmental adaptability	Vibrant and interactive		Flexible mentality	
	Resilience Teaching duties	Encouragement			

Positive Emotion

Seligman (2011) described positive emotions as hedonic feelings such as happiness, satisfaction, pride, and comfort. These emotions serve as an indicator of generating and expanding flourishing, that is, expanding people's momentary thought-action capabilities and building lasting personal resources (including physical and intellectual resources) to generate positive future expectations.

Participants generally (n=5) reported that the freedom to adapt and innovatively apply online teaching technologies resulted in professional confidence and a high degree of adaptability to the work environment. For example, DR. D told the author that for her, online teaching and working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic provided her with the opportunity to freely try new teaching technologies. Adapting to this change allowed her to maintain optimism and enthusiasm for teaching. DR. D shared the following:

The convenience of working from home has boosted my energy and restored my enthusiasm (...) Teaching online is more fulfilling because it provides her with the freedom to try out new teaching techniques. I enjoy trying out a variety of techniques to see what works. What works. What works and what doesn't (...) It is crucial for me to remain adaptable, open to change, willing to learn and innovate to generate and maintain energy and optimism.

It is worth noting that the work-from-home policy and online teaching due to the pandemic also provided positive emotions of "confidence and equality" for newcomers in the work environment. As a lecturer who only recently joined the current private university in January 2022, DR. L pointed out that the adoption and application of new technologies in online teaching triggered by the pandemic enabled an equal starting point for every lecturer, regardless of their past teaching experience. This helped them quickly adapt to the new teaching environment and gradually strengthened their confidence and stress resilience. DR. L explained:

Regardless of our teaching years, we have to have online courses, which means everyone can start over, like me (I just joined TU in January 2022) (...) I don't need to because of the experience Feeling inadequate and incompetent, I am optimistic that I can find ways to learn better in online courses, and although I am still in the "trial and error" and self-exploration stage, I will still be able to benefit my students (...) After I taught a module cycle, the negative feelings (lack of confidence) slowly disappeared and I became more confident once I became more familiar with what I was teaching.

However, some participants (n=2) also admitted that while lecturers were disappointed when they realised that students did not like online teaching or when lecturers used new technologies, they did not give up on improving student participation or degree of effort. Nevertheless, when students refused to participate in class and communicate with the lecturer continuously, it still led to some degree of depression and tension among the lecturers.

I tried various strategies to ensure student engagement and interaction, but it was difficult to ensure student engagement and attention. Giving and maintaining one-on-one attention was difficult. (DR. U)

I'm very upset because all my students don't want to turn on their cameras. It's a bad attitude because some students just sleep on their beds with their cameras on. Forcing students to turn on their cameras would be seen as an invasion of privacy in my opinion. I can't see what they're doing, I can't hear what they're discussing (...) It's like being 'blind' and it makes me nervous. (DR. N)

The majority of participants (n=4) reported deteriorating health conditions due to high job stress and prolonged computer use, resulting in burnout and exhaustion. This stems from the time they need to work from home and constant monitoring from their supervisors. During the pandemic, the participants (n=3) adopted methods such as practicing mindfulness, communicating with family members, painting, and developing healthy routines to maintain a positive attitude and overall health in order to relieve stress.

However, when they returned to face-to-face teaching and offline working environments, the effects of high workload, long computer use, long periods of sitting, and other deteriorating health conditions such as stress and burnout caused by the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life have truly completely disappeared. On the one hand, this is because opportunities for instant personal communication with colleagues and students have been restored. On the other hand, after returning to face-to-face classes, lecturers' personal life space and work environment space have been separated again.

DR. N stated that her ongoing sources of stress were low student engagement in online classes and refusal to make eye contact with lecturers by turning off cameras and microphones. However, after the pandemic, she quickly recovered from this pressure because *"I'm coping better now than I was during the flu because I see my friends in the staff room and chat to them before class"*.

DR. D said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, she worked and gave classes on the computer at home for a long time, resulting in short-term stress, burnout,

and even depression. But this blurred state between working hours and daily life completely disappeared after she and her colleagues returned to offline work. Her feedback:

When working from home, it often feels like there are no defined working hours. I find myself spending a lot more time in front of my laptop than before, which is draining me both mentally and physically (...) Management requires me to monitor closely. Our work hours can often be frustrating and scary, and it creates a feeling of needing to constantly prove yourself (...) But when the work-from-home situation ends and we return to physical workplaces on campus, these negative moods (burnout, depression and high fatigue) are over.

Thus, working from home provided greater flexibility and freedom, as described by participants in this study. However, constant supervision from supervisors and students' refusal to interact with instructors in online courses were two stressors that contributed to higher levels of instructor stress and burnout. These factors made the lecturers feel "dissatisfied" and "anxious" about potential low performance, thus affecting their sense of well-being.

Engagement

Seligman (2011) described engagement as the psychological connection established between a participant and an activity or organisation, such as feelings of being absorbed, interested, and involved in life. All participants (n=5) stated that lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic could effectively use online teaching technologies (such as Zoom, Whiteboard, Quiz and other applications) to ensure that students can continue to learn in a safe space and engage in academic activities. This immersive experiential atmosphere strengthened lecturers' exploration and application of online teaching technologies and strategies to maintain immersion in academic research and teaching activities, thereby maintaining a high degree of resistance to stress and burnout.

Participants (n=5) generally stated that they perceived and maintained high levels of student engagement in classroom activities. In the process, they continuously experimented and innovated their own teaching techniques and strategies, using digital tools to replicate the same immersive experience of face-to-face teaching. The participants (n=5) identified the above approaches as key coping strategies for improving teacher well-being and reducing teacher burnout associated with high workloads.

DR. N shared that student involvement was the source of her own happiness. However, she also noted that student engagement was the hardest challenge during

this period. In highlighting that a student's personality determines their level of participation, she gave the following example:

Some students are very proactive. They lead group work. Some students are more convenient and just sit and listen without expressing any opinions. Some students do not participate at all because their English level is very poor. This is because they do not understand what they have to accomplish. It was very frustrating for me and the other group members (...) my stress level went up.

Based on the examples and perspectives provided by DR. N and other participants, the level of student engagement clearly affected lecturers' stress level and the way they responded to different stressful situations. The authors found that when student engagement is high, teachers will acquire and maintain high levels of conscientiousness, a positive sense of achievement-oriented teacher identity, and lower levels of depression and stress. Additionally, to ensure that lecturers maintain their well-being and low stress levels through good proactive coping skills, authentic communication with individuals in close relationships (colleagues, mentors, and students) is crucial. Therefore, the willingness to cooperate and expressing oneself as a compassionate person is an effective proactive coping strategy.

Relationships

Seligman (2011) described positive relationships as connections with others where individuals feel socially included, cared for, supported, and satisfied. Within this theme, participants (n=5) admitted that they maintained positive social relationships during online teaching and working from home by "socialising with colleagues." There is a widespread emphasis on the important role that social media plays in building and maintaining positive social relationships and emotions. The importance of support from the educator community and colleagues is evidenced by the fact that all study participants spoke highly of their institution's teaching centre. The centre was supportive in providing general technical support, as well as providing advice and exposure to new online course platforms in the learning management systems that they used. "Weekly Meet" activities were also arranged by tutors to meet students' social interaction and discussion needs.

DR. U shared about the "weekly contact hour" organised by her faculty's dean which included online games and quizzes, karaoke competitions, or just a casual chat about the lecturers' week and personal reflections. This created a strong sense of camaraderie within the team. Echoing the same sentiment, DR. L expressed that maintaining regular contact with colleagues and students, even virtually, is crucial. She said, *"I co-taught the postgraduate module with an experienced colleague (...) which was a valuable experience because I felt supported when I first taught at this school".*

DR. L added that communicating with colleagues and learning from their experiences regarding adapting to the new working environment is a powerful way to support lecturers' happiness. *"Regular interaction, sharing of ideas and mutual support creates a sense of community and camaraderie that further fuels my optimism and energy,"* she said.

Notably, the majority of participants (n=3) specifically mentioned "independent coping" as a proactive coping strategy that utilised personal resources. There was no conflict between coping independently and interacting with other closely related individuals, and they attributed this ability to work independently and collaborate with others towards balance and flexibility in response to the challenges of the pandemic in their careers. DR. D had this to say:

I appreciate being able to work independently in a separate personal space (such as my own home) and handle stress on my own when necessary (...) While I value the support of my family, effective communication with students, and camaraderie among colleagues, I Discovered my ability to manage stress and burnout independently.

Meaning

Seligman (2011) described meaning as a person's belief that one's life has value and the feeling of being connected to something greater than oneself. In this study, participants' personal meanings were often based on their professional identities. It generally manifests as lecturers successfully impart knowledge to students by adapting and proactively using new technologies in online teaching, cultivating students' student engagement levels, critical thinking and academic skills, thereby enabling students to grow and succeed. Participants generally reported that these goals did not change or were affected negatively during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the challenges posed by the pandemic further strengthened their commitment to teaching. Moreover, the crisis propelled them to continually adapt and innovate their teaching techniques and strategies in providing high-quality learning experiences.

DR. L described the significance of her teaching:

Teaching allows me to influence more people now. When I was a middle school teacher, I could only influence those 1,200 students taught. But, as a lecturer, I can help develop student teachers. They will also create meaningful things. If each student teacher can impact 100 students, then the 35 I teach Students may impact the lives of 3,500 people in terms of intelligence, character, attitude, etc.

Essentially, the “meaning” of teacher happiness, which involves student engagement and student academic investment, is not only realised in the teaching environment in terms of satisfaction and performance, but also the sense of mission teachers feel in the process. This can also be referred to as delayed gratification. These two dimensions together constitute the “sense of meaning” of teachers’ happiness, according to DR. L.

Participants (n=5) also shared that their well-being was “meaningful” and felt more positive when they cared about students and experienced positive feedback from students (e.g., high engagement, high student performance). Thus, teacher emotions = positive student feedback. Further, the teaching pressure during the pandemic did not change the “meaning” of the lecturers’ endeavours, but instead confirmed that lecturers can confirm the meaning of their teaching through positive emotions (such as enthusiasm). In other words, irrespective of the changes that take place in the teaching environment, it continues to be student-centred.

Achievement

Seligman (2011) contended that achievement is based on an individual’s perception of their own meaning, that is, the individual believes that he or she has the ability to make progress toward established goals in daily activities, and that this behaviour is meaningful. The participants in this study described their accomplishments as a motivation to achieve specific goals or more generally, a sense of competence. Two of the participants explicitly reported academic success as their achievement while all five associated achievement with meaning that increased teacher well-being.

DR. L expressed that the growth in her knowledge and skills was her achievement during the pandemic as follows:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had the opportunity to work with researchers at the University of Plymouth in the UK to design and develop home learning kits for children with autism (...) We successfully invited parents from Malaysia and the UK to Our home learning kit that was pilot tested and received a positive response from them.

Ultimately, DR. L and her colleagues successfully published several papers on home learning. They also organised an international webinar to discuss the challenges faced by children with special educational needs during the pandemic and shared their home learning packs with the public. She noted that her experience encouraged her to continue building networks with researchers from different countries, thereby expanding her knowledge and research skills.

On another note, DR. D shared her own practical results. “One of my most valuable accomplishments is that I was named one of the top ten lecturers two years in

a row while in college, including during the pandemic,” she reported. She believed that this achievement has enhanced her confidence and motivation, and is also a validation of her teaching goals and commitment: “This reflects my commitment to providing students with a high-quality education, adapting to new teaching methods and maintaining strong student engagement”.

The results demonstrate that participants underwent stable teacher well-being and fortitude during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants ($n = 4$) believed that the blurred boundaries between personal life and work life played a leading role in the high pressure, burnout and mental health of teachers. However, all the participants ($n = 5$) remained confident and optimistic about their teaching skills during the migration to online teaching space. This positive emotion lasted for a long time even after the pandemic ended while the negative emotions brought by the pandemic continued to slowly dissipate. In other words, they had high autonomy on their emotions and health, and this positive impact continued to this day. We can summarise that their well-being and positive emotions during the pandemic were determined and maintained by the following strategies:

- (1) Support for teaching relationship. Lecturers attribute their achievements and satisfaction to their high self-efficacy in helping students adapt to the new virtual learning environment.
- (2) Support from social relations. Through close social relationships with families and students as well as online social activities organised by school managers, lecturers benefitted from the camaraderie and support of the entire education community to manage the burnout and depression caused by isolation.
- (3) Adapting to innovation. The migration of the teaching space from face-to-face to online provided lecturers with opportunities to explore and apply new teaching methods and digital applications.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be established that the participants of this study reported a balanced and stable relationship between their well-being and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants reported that negative emotions such as stress and burnout had mild effects on their positive emotions and physical health. In other words, the negative emotions did not cause any specific long-term negative psychological effects such as depression or bipolar disorder. There was also no substantial positive changes in the participants' overall well-being, and their state of well-being during the pandemic was not significantly different from their pre-pandemic or current state. Nevertheless, the experience of positive emotions broadened the range of lecturers' momentary thoughts and actions, allowing them to adapt to the shift from face-to-face teaching courses to online teaching spaces. This series of new thoughts and actions, in turn, built their lasting personal

resources, including physical, intellectual, social, and psychological. These additional resources drove continued success, personal growth, and achievements for the participants, which in turn led to an upward spiral of more positive emotions and self-reinforcement.

The authors suggest that future research could potentially include lecturers from more higher education institutions, including lecturers from public versus private universities, as well as from different departments and geographical locations. Furthermore, since this study took place in a private university with good online facilities, future studies could continue to investigate the effect of supportive social and teaching networks on online teaching conditions and teacher well-being. Another potential area for future investigation could be the impact of faculty well-being on the academic achievement of lecturers. Findings from these studies could support universities' efforts to advance online teaching and learning to improve their academic ratings. These findings may also be useful to the Ministry of Higher Education and public or private higher education institutions in Malaysia that intend to institutionalise online education.

In general, this study shed light into the well-being of Malaysian lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also established that teacher well-being based on Seligman's PERMA well-being model contains three common dimensions, that is, positive interactive relationships between teachers and students, supportive socialisation among peers, and effective adaptation to the online teaching environment. These three dimensions helped the participants of this study to adopt proactive coping strategies to overcome challenges such as high stress and burnout caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lecturers who were forced to migrate to online teaching did not suffer any significant damage to their physical and mental health, but at the same time, their determination and need to apply online teaching technology to face-to-face classes have also strengthened. Essentially, this indicates that the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and university management should strive to translate the experience of online teaching and staff support during the pandemic into measures and policies that can help lecturers to adapt smoother and easier to the normalisation of online education with a strong emphasis on teacher well-being.

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