

THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 TO ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE (THE EXPERIENCE OF MUHAMMADIYAH ISLAMIC COLLEGE)

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Abstrak

Makalah ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengaruh dari covid-19 yang saat ini melanda seluruh dunia dengan tingkat kematian yang sangat tinggi terhadap dunia pendidikan khususnya Lembaga Pendidikan Islam di Singapura yaitu Muhammadiyah Islamic College. Dengan metode qualitative dan dengan pendekatan kajian pustaka melalui website resmi pemerintah Singapura, didapati bahwa MIC mengambil kebijakan untuk melakukan online learning melalui zoom dan perubahan terhadap system evaluasi peserta didik. Dengan penerimaan yang sangat baik saat ini terhadap pembelajaran daring, diharapkan terbangunnya universitas Islam Internasional yang berbasis daring.

Kata Kunci: Covid-19, Pendidikan Islam, Singapura, MIC.

Abstract

This paper aims to determine the effect of Covid-19 which is currently hitting the entire world with a very high mortality rate in the world of education, especially the Islamic Education Institution in Singapore, namely the Muhammadiyah Islamic College. With a qualitative method and a literature review approach through the official website of the Singapore government, it was found that MIC took a policy to conduct online learning through zooming and changes to the student evaluation system. With the current excellent acceptance of online learning, it is hoped that an online-based international Islamic university will be built.

Keywords: Covid-19, Islamic Education, Singapore, MIC.

A. Introduction

In this year, 2020, the world was shaken by the discovery of a mysterious virus known as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). This virus was first discovered in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019. It spread rapidly to many countries including Singapore within just a matter of months.

Due to COVID-19, roads were empty, places of worship have been deserted, the *Ka'bah* for a period of time was unavailable, *Masjid Nabawi*, known as the Prophet's Mosque where longing is satiated, was closed. Family units were separated – spouses from their partners, children and even grandchildren from their parents and grandparents; even the playgrounds were silent from the sounds and laughter of children. It was as though everyone was under suspicion of carrying the virus.

The impact of COVID-19 has made life uncertain. Businesses experienced losses, many economies collapsed, many people lost their jobs, plans made for 2020 had to be altered or worse, cancelled. Global super powers like America and China along with European countries, were unable to cope with handling this virus.

COVID-19 has greatly affected the education sector. Based on the report from Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), entitled "Education and COVID-19: Focusing on the long-term impacted of school closures", the impact of COVID-19 on about 188 countries has affected about 1.7 million students who were left unable to study due to the closure.¹

In Singapore, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) informed all Islamic Education Centres and Providers (IECP) on closure of schools, Madrasahs and the cancellation of all activities and instead learning was shifted to online learning with effect from 7 April 2020.

The purpose of this research is to investigate two questions in the education sector:

1. How has COVID-19 affected Muhammadiyah Islamic College, Singapore?
2. What is the future of online learning in Islamic education through online learning?

B. Method of Research

The approach used in this research is the qualitative method. It will describe Muhammadiyah Islamic College in the light of pandemic Covid 19 and how they respond towards the changes. The methodology in collecting data is through literature review which were collected from trusted government websites, and through in-depth interviews with lecturers and field observations. Once the data has been collected and analysed, it is then interpreted in the form of research results.

C. Discussion

1. Islamic Education in Singapore

Singapore was part of Malaya before gaining independence in 1965. As one of the states in the Straits Settlement, Singapore was under British rule like Penang and Melaka. Due to this, the emergence of Islamic education in Singapore, historically, is similar to other parts of Malaya – as early as the arrival of Islam itself. According to Nor Raudah Haji Siren, Azrin Abdul Majid and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, Islamic Education was taught by Muslim Scholars who came from the other countries in South East Asia or Western Asia and also from the Indian subcontinent. Syaikh Khatib Minangkabau, Syaikh Tuanku Mudo Wali Aceh, Syaikh Ahmad Aminuddin Luis Bangkahulu, Syaikh Syed Usman bin Yahya bin Akil (Mufti Betawi), Syaikh Habib Ali Hansyi (Kwitang Jakarta), Syaikh

¹ <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses>

Anwar Seribandung (Palembang), Syaikh Mustafa Hussain (Purba Baru Tapanuli) dan Syaikh Muhammad Jamil Jaho (Padang Panjang) were among the Muslim scholars.²

Islamic Education from the 15th century to the end of 19th century was only on Quranic Studies and these were taught in Quranic boarding schools or at the local schools. In these informal institutions, students learnt the Arabic language by memorising the Quran. Students were also taught about the 5 daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadhan and Pilgrimage to Mecca. Lessons on *Aqidah*, etiquette and Arabic Islamic songs were also taught with the intention of having Islamic traditions inculcated in students. However, unfortunately, the principles of the Quran on the social, moral, political and economic roles of humans that can be found in the Quran were not taught to the students. During this limited learning period, capable students went the extra mile by studying the Malay language by using the Jawi writing system and they were later appointed as teachers.³

Islamic boarding schools provided accommodation for all students nearby to the homes of the religious teachers. Here, they were taught lessons on Tawhid (Monotheism in Islam), Tafsir (Exegesis of the Quran), Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), Hadith (Record of the traditions and sayings of the prophet), Arabic grammar, Tasawwuf (Etiquettes) and Islamic History. The method of learning is by memorizing and copywriting.

The first formal institution was Madrasah As-Sibyan, founded in 1905 at Bussorah Street, close to the Sultan Mosque. The system and curriculum taught were similar to the education system at the Islamic boarding schools.

Madrasah Al-Iqbal was the first modern madrasah, founded in 1908 by Syed Sheikh Ahmad Al-Hadi. He was an Islamic reformer, who was well known in the world of journalism. Students in this madrasah learnt techniques of memorizing the Quran and Arabic Language and Grammar, Islamic Ethics, Geography, History, Mathematics, English Language and Town Planning. However this Madrasah was short lived.

Subsequently, other madrasahs were established such as Alsagoff Al-Arabiah (1912), Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah (1927), Madrasah Al-Ma'arif Al-Islamiah (1936), Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah (1946), Madrasah Al-Irsyad Zuhri Al-Islamiah (1947) and Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah (1958). These madrasahs served as platforms for Malay Muslim children to receive Islamic education to this day and function as full-time madrasah, where students are guided on how to face modern challenges of globalization in this era.⁴

When the Singapore government approved The Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) in 1966 and MUIS was created in 1968, full-time madrasahs were then placed under the care of MUIS. Currently, Islamic Education in Singapore can

² Nor Raudah Haji Siren, Azrin Abdul Majida dan Syed MuhdKhairudin Aljunied, *Sistem Pendidikan Islam Sekolah Agama (Madrasah) di Singapura*, Jurnal al-Tamaddun, Bil 9 (2), 2014, h. 19.

³ https://en.wikipedid.org/wiki/Madrasahs_in_Singapore, retrieved 11 August 2020.

⁴ <https://www.muis.gov.sg/madrasah>, retrieved 11 August 2020.

be divided into two groups namely: (a) full time madrasahs, and (b) part time madrasahs

Based on AMLA, there are 6 full time madrasahs currently under the guidance of MUIS. The 6 madrasahs are Madrasah Al Irsyad Al Zuhri, Madrasah Alsaqoff Al Arabiyyah, Madrasah Al Ma'arif al Islamiyyah, Madrasah Aljunied Al Islamiyyah, Madrasah Al Arabiyyah Al Islamiyyah and Madrasah Wak Tanjung Al Islamiyyah.

On the other hand, part time madrasahs can be divided into two categories, namely: (a) part time education conducted by Islamic community organisations such as the Muhammadiyah Association of Singapore, the Jamiyyah Association and other organisations. And, (b) part time education conducted at the mosques in Singapore.

The difference between the two categories above is that parttime education conducted by Islamic community organizations usually use their own self-developed curriculum with approval from MUIS. On the other hand, parttime education conducted in mosques, uses the curriculum developed by MUIS called aLIVE, which stands for Learning Islamic Values Everyday. There are four types of aLIVE classes, namely, Kids aLIVE, Tweens aLIVE, Teens aLIVE and Youth aLIVE as shown in the diagram below:⁵

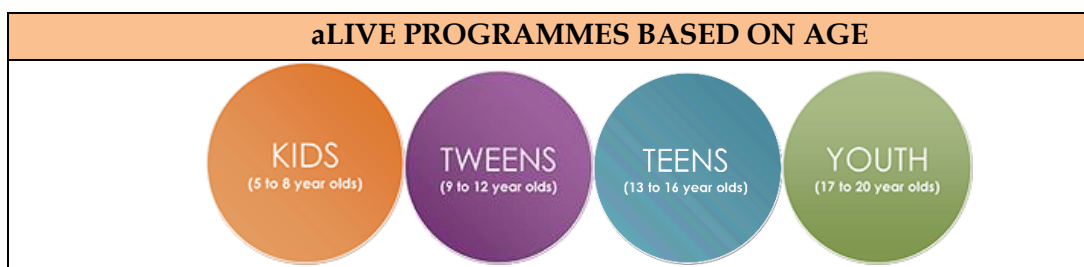


Photo 1: aLIVE programmes conducted at the Mosques

The aLIVE program provides Islamic Religious Education for children aged between 5 to 20 years old, Kids aLIVE for children aged between 5 to 8 years old; Tweens aLIVE for children aged 9 to 12 years old; Teens aLIVE for teenagers between 13 to 16 years old and Youth aLIVE for teenagers between 17 to 20 years old.

In addition to the madrasahs mentioned above, there are several Islamic higher education institutions that are recognized and accredited by the Singapore government through MUIS. One of the Islamic education institutions currently active in Singapore is the Muhammadiyah Islamic College (MIC), also known as Kolej Islam Muhammadiyah.

MIC is one of the Islamic higher education institutions under Muhammadiyah Association of Singapore. The MIC was inaugurated on 15 April

⁵ <http://www.muis.gov.sg/alive/>, retrieved 11 August 2020.

2000, and is currently located at 17, Geylang Lorong 13, Singapore. MIC's journey from 2000 to 2020 in terms of its history is something to be proud of, overcoming various challenges to successfully produce graduates in Islamic education.

2. COVID-19 Situation in Singapore

COVID-19 has infected more than 37 million people with a death rate of more than one million people worldwide. In Singapore alone, there were 57,786 cases as of 11 October 2020, with 27 deaths.⁶ With this very minimal mortality rate, Singapore is one of the countries that has succeeded in reducing the number of deaths caused by the Covid-19 virus. Singapore is also recognised as the country with the smallest percentage of deaths in the world.

Singapore's success in this regard is due to the persistence and good cooperation between the government and its citizens. Since the first COVID-19 case was discovered in Singapore on 23 January 2020, the government and the COVID-19 front liners have been working in tandem with government policy. Safety measures have been implemented at all entry points in Singapore on land, sea and air. Body temperature screening devices have been installed in all crowded places such as malls and restaurants as well as places of gathering such as houses of worship and markets.

On 3 April 2020, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a large scale transitional restriction, known as Circuit Breaker, aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19 in Singapore. These measures were taken after the increase in new cases that were not related to the infected cases in the previous month, as well as the risk of infection arising from previously infected groups. Non-essential companies were instructed to close and work from home. Since 8 April 2020, virtual learning has taken place in both government and private institutions. All restaurants and food courts were prohibited to operate fully and were only permitted to sell packed food or via food delivery applications. In addition, on 14 April 2020, the then Minister of National Development Mr Lawrence Wong has made it mandatory for everyone to use masks when outside of their places of residence. It would be an offence for those who does not comply with the law. This Circuit Breaker was initially planned to end on 14 May 2020 but it was delayed with the announcement on 19 May 2020 of Safe Reopening which was to happen in several phases

The safe reopening was divided into 3 phases, which are:

- a. Phase 1 of Safe Reopening happened on 2 June 2020 where work activities at offices can resume with restrictions of the number of staff and operating hours. Essential services like hair salons and gym were permitted to resume activities.
- b. Phase 2, known as the Safe Transition, allowed office activities to resume like before but safety management measures have to be observed.

⁶ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>, retrieved 12 August 2020.

Restaurants and food courts can resume operations but with restrictions on the number of patrons at any one time. Currently Phase 2 is still in place and awaiting announcement for Phase 3.

- c. Phase 3, known as Safe Nation, where all activities will be allowed to reopen and it is hoped that during this phase, a vaccine is found.

3. COVID-19's Impact on MIC

One of the key areas that is affected by the presence of COVID-19 is the education sector. The COVID-19 pandemic forced almost all higher education institutes in the world to change their teaching modes and go online using various platforms for online learning, mobile learning and web-based learning.

E-learning is defined as an innovative type of learning that occurs online with materials in digital or other forms. The main purpose is to provide a personal, open, pleasant and interactive learning experience that supports students in their learning process.

This online learning brought about a lot of uncertainties starting from exact learning technology and the ideal lecture scheme will be implemented in higher education institutes for the coming years.

Given that Singapore is one of the more developed countries in the field of technology, it was not an obstacle implementing e-learning here. In terms of internet speed, according to a study done by Cupo Nation, as quoted by Kompas.com, on average, the speed of internet cable in Southeast Asia is 45.69 Mbps. Singapore is the country with the fastest internet cable connection speed. Singapore's average internet speed is able to reach a speed as high as 197.04 Mbps. In second place is Malaysia, with internet speed up to 70, 18 Mbps.⁷ This greatly supported the implementation of distance learning or online learning.

That is also the experience of MIC. Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) announced that home-based learning was to start on 7 April 2020. However, MIC implemented distance learning or e-learning two weeks before the official start date of home-based learning. Since March 2020, MIC decided to stop all face-to-face classroom learning and replace it with online learning via applications like Zoom or others that were able to support online learning.

The learning evaluation system also went through a significant change. Previously MIC used written exams and assignments to evaluate the students. For all courses that are taught, regardless of whether they are compulsory or optional, the weightage to assess assignments should not exceed more than 30% from the total grade of 100%.

The above system has undergone a change since the spread of COVID-19 in line with the changes from face-to-face learning to online learning from April 2020 to January 2021.

⁷ <https://tekno.kompas.com/read/2019/03/18/16530097/adu-kencang-internet-kabel-se-asia-tenggara-hasilnya#>, retrieved 12 August 2020.

The new evaluation system that will be used as reference would be as the follows: (a) written assignment, (b) presentation using powerpoint or video, (c) daily assignment, (d) oral test, and (e) attendance and participation

Each lecturer is expected to choose 2 or 3 of the above options to fulfill 100% of students' grades with the condition that attendance and participation scores cannot exceed 30% of the total score. An example of the application of the evaluation system mentioned is as follows:

- a. Written assignment (40%) + Presentation (40%) + Attendance (20%) and/or,
- b. Daily assignment (35%) + Oral Test (35%) + Attendance (30%) and/or,
- c. Written assignment (70%) + Attendance (30%).

At the start of the shift towards online learning during Phase One of Circuit Breaker, things did not go so smoothly. There were many technical and non-technical difficulties faced by both lecturers and students. Based on interviews by researchers with both local and overseas lecturers for the degree programme at MIC, we can conclude that the following difficulties were experienced during online learning:

- a. Unstable internet connection that caused intermittent audio.
- b. Inadequate display devices for learning.
- c. Electronic tools like laptops or computers that did not support online learning sufficiently.

The learning process also was not as easy as imagined. A lot of challenges were found in the learning process. Some of these difficulties were:

- a. Skills of both lecturers and students in using online learning technology specifically for the Zoom application.
- b. Lower participation from students in learning.
- c. Communication became one-way only.
- d. Lecturers faced difficulties assessing understanding of students based on the lessons taught.
- e. According to lecturers, education is not only about transferring knowledge to students. It is also about passing on good morals and manners, which was missing in online learning.
- f. Cyber crime that was able to attack online learning applications. Development of technology does not rule out the possibility of gaps in a system for such applications.

4. Positive Impact and Future of Online Learning

Certainly, from a policy that is newly applied, we can learn from its negative aspects so that we could improve it and make it better. In addition, there will also be positive changes that can be applied to improve on status quo.

This is the same for online learning. There are many positive take aways that we can take from online learning. Some of these are:

- a. Flexibility in learning, in terms of time and place. Learning can be conducted anytime according to a pre-arranged agreement between lecturers and students.
- b. Lecturers and students are certainly safer as there is no direct contact that would potentially spread COVID-19.
- c. Online learning also allows for more freedom in thinking creatively as students are at home, which is a comfort zone for them.
- d. Institutions can be more efficient in managing operational costs.
- e. As we are already in the Industry 4.0 era, lecturers and students are compelled to be more competent in utilising modern technologies.
- f. Able to invite overseas lecturers who have competence in specific fields of knowledge to share their knowledge.

With the positive aspects mentioned above, there is a possibility in the future that online learning may be a strong contender for education in the future. Furthermore, the community's enthusiasm in responding to change due to the spread of COVID-19 was very good. With current learning technology applied almost everywhere in the world, it opens the opportunity to learn in campuses anywhere without leaving the country or even their house. College students can come from various countries with diverse knowledge options and even lecturers can come from various countries with competence in specific knowledge areas.

Various opportunities are available to be considered for the future of Islamic Education in Singapore, among them:

- a. Develop an online-based International Islamic University at an affordable cost which is reputable and recognized internationally.
- b. Co-operation between universities across countries in developing online-based joint research.
- c. Co-operation in areas of learning with a credit transfer system.
- d. Conducting skills courses that will equip students in facing the current challenges.
- e. Develop research in the form of cross knowledge disciplines and across countries.
- f. Co-operation in exchange of lecturers with academic qualifications and international recognition.

To conclude, this pandemic has forced us to get used to the new normal. This virus has brought a wind of change that should be addressed with faith and knowledge. Do not let the virus stop our creativity and the world of Islamic Education from progressing, or even go backwards.

D. Conclusion

Since end of March 2020, learning at MIC has changed from face-to-face to online learning via Zoom application. The assessment system was also changed such that assignments were given the most weightage replacing written exams. Online learning can be an alternative learning system in the future and there can be a possibility of starting a reputable and recognized International Islamic University by developing knowledge cross disciplines and across countries.

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