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Predicting students' intentions for post-COVID-19 face-to-face classes

Wei Boon Quah[1,2], Krishnavehni Gopal[3]
[1]Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia
[2]Human Resources Management Division, Ministry of Higher Education, Putrajaya, Malaysia
[3]Department of General Studies, Sungai Petani Community College, Sungai Petani, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic led to community college closures, with reopening being considered as a potential strategy to enhance learning outcomes. However, existing literature lacks insights into the factors that determine students' intention to attend limited face-to-face classes. To address this gap, a study was conducted to explore the intentions of 122 English students at a Malaysian community college regarding attendance in such classes post-reopening, using the theory of planned behavior as a framework. Results indicated a moderate level of intention to attend. Perceived behavioral control (PBC) and subjective norm positively predicted students' intentions, while attitude did not significantly contribute. These findings highlight the critical role of PBC and subjective norms in shaping students' intentions. As many community colleges prepare for phased reopening, understanding students' diverse perspectives is crucial for informed decision-making regarding in-person instruction. Institutions must consider these factors to gain nuanced insights into students' inclinations towards face-to-face classes, thereby facilitating effective planning amidst ongoing uncertainties.

Corresponding Author:

Wei Boon Quah
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
Persiaran Masjid, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: skyman823000@yahoo.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unparalleled challenges to global education. Beyond its devastating impact on public health, it has also triggered an unprecedented educational crisis [1]. At the height of the pandemic, over 1.6 billion students across more than 190 countries were out of school, and over 100 million educators and school staff were affected by the sudden closure of educational institutions [2]. Consequently, the educational system has undergone significant disruptions, prompting schools and institutions to focus intensively and develop innovative strategies to sustain educational efforts amidst the challenges of the pandemic and the shift to virtual learning [3], [4]. Research conducted in community colleges has demonstrated that online learning has been essential in maintaining continuous education during the pandemic while also helping to protect students from viral transmission [5], [6]. However, community college students have expressed dissatisfaction with remote virtual learning [7], citing concerns about the potential impact of this educational disruption on their program completion and future careers.

Given the challenges and reservations expressed by both students and faculty about the feasibility of online instruction in hands-on courses such as automotive, beauty therapy, hospitality, and culinary, maintaining the closure of educational institutions is considered impractical [8]. Governments may consider

reopening higher education facilities as a strategy to address learning gaps and prevent students from falling behind in their COVID-19 response plans [9]. However, the resumption of in-person classes requires careful planning, strict adherence to national and international protocols, and a strong commitment to prioritizing the safety of both faculty and students [10], [11]. Although some countries have already reopened their schools, the emergence of new COVID-19 variants, such as Omicron, has led to the suspension of face-to-face learning in certain educational systems once again [12].

In Malaysia, preparations for the return to in-person education and the resumption of school activities in low-risk regions began in the final quarter of 2021. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) issued guidelines for organizing limited face-to-face sessions to address learning disparities caused by emergency online learning and the suspension of practical classes during the pandemic [13]. Subsequently, starting from March 1, 2022, the government implemented a phased reopening of campuses for students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) under the MOHE, with campus capacity ranging from 70% to 100% [14].

The resumption of in-person classes is crucial for community college programs focused on practical and specialized skills, where hands-on learning is most effective. However, several studies have indicated that reopening schools may contribute to increased anxiety and depression among students [15], [16]. Given the negative impact and heightened fear caused by the COVID-19 outbreak among college students [17], it is essential to understand the key factors influencing their willingness to participate in face-to-face classes as institutions prepare for the safe return of students to campuses [18]. Moreover, according to a survey conducted by the BEAN organization among university students in Vietnam, 46.2% of respondents expressed a preference for studying on campus rather than online once COVID-19 is under control. Additionally, 35.3% of students showed an interest in blended learning, while only 4.6% preferred online learning [19].

However, literature on the determinants of community college students' behavioral intentions to attend face-to-face classes is limited [20], [21]. Most existing research on community college education centers on students' experiences [22], [23] and satisfaction with online learning [24], [25]. As COVID-19 restrictions ease both in country and globally, investigating students' intentions towards on-campus learning becomes increasingly important [26]. While some studies have explored school reopening after temporary closures due to pandemic threats, these efforts primarily focused on teachers and parents [27]–[30]. There is a clear need for dedicated research that specifically examines the perspectives and intentions of students regarding their return to in-person classes. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to explore the factors influencing the inclination of students enrolled in English subjects to engage in in-person instruction after nearly two years of remote learning.

2. METHOD

In this cross-sectional study, researchers focused on students from a community college in the Kedah region of Malaysia who were enrolled in an English subject. Of the 130 eligible students, 122 participated in the survey, resulting in a response rate of 93.8%. Data collection took place in September 2022 via Google Forms. Before participating, all respondents were fully informed about the study's purpose and provided explicit consent. To ensure anonymity, no personally identifiable information was collected from the participants.

The research instrument in this study was adapted from Oducado *et al.* [21] which is based on the theory of planned behavior. The back-translation method involved two key steps. First, a qualified translator, who is a native speaker of the target language (Malay language), translated the questionnaire from the source language (English) into Malay language to ensure accuracy. Then, another independent translator, also a native speaker of Malay language, back translated the questionnaire into English without access to the original version. This process helps identify potential issues and ensures a faithful translation, enhancing the overall quality and consistency of the final questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, with five items corresponding to each of the four constructs of the theory of planned behavior: attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control (PBC), and behavioral intention. For example, sample items included statements like "I believe it is okay to attend limited face-to-face classes" for attitude and "I plan to attend limited face-to-face classes" for behavioral intention. Participants rated all items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Data analysis was performed using IBM statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies (percentages) and means (with standard deviations), were used to describe the responses. To explore associations among key variables, Pearson's correlation was applied. Additionally, multiple linear regression was conducted to identify significant predictors, with statistical significance recognized at a level of $p<0.05$.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that the average age of the students was 18 years old. Among the respondents, 63 (51.6%) were females, and 59 (48.4%) were males. The ethnic distribution indicates that 114 (93.4%) respondents were Malay, 3 (2.5%) were Chinese, 3 (2.5%) were Indian, and only 2 (1.6%) identified as Siam. Based on the data in Table 1, it can be observed that the students enrolled in the certificate of automotive program were the most responsive to the survey, accounting for nearly half of the participants (45.1%). The certificate of hotel operation and certificate of culinary followed with enrollment percentages of 20.5% and 17.2%, respectively. Regarding the subjects enrolled, a significant majority of 60.7% of the students opted for communicative English. Workplace English had an enrollment of 32.8%, making it the second most popular subject. Business English 1 had the lowest enrollment at 6.6% of the total participants.

A pilot study has been conducted to test the reliability of the instrument. A total of 30 respondents with the same characteristics as the real respondents were involved in this pilot study. All the constructs demonstrated strong reliability values: attitude (0.771), subjective norm (0.832), PBC (0.756), and intention (0.748). The present study aimed to examine the correlations between four variables: attitude, subjective norm, PBC, and behavioral intention. The Pearson correlation coefficients showed that subjective norm had a significant positive correlation with behavioral intention (r=0.641, p<0.01), followed by PBC, which also had a significant positive correlation with behavioral intention (r=0.754, p<0.01). In contrast, attitude had a weak and insignificant correlation with behavioral intention of students to attend limited face-to face classes (r=-0.038, p=0.676), as shown in Table 2.

Multiple regression analysis is a statistical method used to predict the dependent variable's outcome based on independent variables. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between three predictor variables: PBC, attitude, and subjective norm, with the dependent variable - behavioral intention. The results obtained from the statistical analysis showed a significant positive relationship between the predictor variables and behavioral intention, as presented in Table 3. The multiple regression analysis showed a moderate to high R-squared value (0.586), indicating that the model was able to explain approximately 59% of the variation in behavioral intention. The ANOVA results revealed that the regression model was statistically significant (F=55.588, p=0.000) with a p-value less than 0.001, indicating that the predictor variables jointly contributed significantly to the prediction of behavioral intention. Table 4 illustrates the influence of attitude, subjective norm, and PBC on behavioral intention. Beta coefficients are utilized to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

Table 1. Demographics respondents

Variable		Value
Age		18.71 (average)
Gender	Male	59 (48.4%)
	Female	63 (51.6%)
Race	Malay	114 (93.4%)
	Chinese	3 (2.5%)
	Indian	3 (2.5%)
	Siam	2 (1.6%)
Program study	Certificate of hotel operation	25 (20.5%)
	Certificate of culinary	21 (17.2%)
	Certificate of automotive	55 (45.1%)
	Certificate of beauty and spa therapy	13 (10.7%)
	Diploma in beauty therapy	8 (6.6%)
Subjects enrolled	Workplace English	40 (32.8%)
	Communicative English	74 (60.7%)
	Business English 1	8 (6.6%)

Table 2. Correlations of all variables

		Attitude	Subjective norm	PBC
Behavioral intention	Pearson correlation	-0.038	0.641**	0.754**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.676	0.000	0.000
	N	122	122	122

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Model summary of relationship between attitude, subjective norm, PBC and behavioral intention

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. Error of the estimate	F	Sig.
1	0.765[a]	0.586	0.575	0.73076	55.588	0.000[b]

a. Dependent variable: behavioral intention

b. Predictors: (constant), attitude, subjective norm, PBC

Table 4. The impact of the attitude, subjective norm, and PBC on behavioral intention

Coefficients[a]					
Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta (β)		
1	(Constant)	0.477	0.145		3.299	0.001
	Attitude	-0.074	0.051	-0.086	-1.453	0.149
	Subjective norm	0.129	0.081	0.146	1.580	0.117
	PBC	0.680	0.097	0.648	7.005	0.000

a. Dependent variable: behavioral intention
b. Predictors: (constant), attitude, subjective norm, PBC

According to the beta coefficients, PBC exhibited the largest coefficient (0.648), indicating the most significant impact on behavioral intention, followed by subjective norm (0.146). However, the effect of attitude was not significant (-0.086). The significance level of each independent variable is shown in the last column, with only PBC displaying a value of less than 0.05, signifying a strong relationship with behavioral intention. The regression equation derived from Table 4 is, as in (1).

$$\gamma = 0.477 + 0.680PBC \quad (1)$$

Where, Y represents behavioral intention (dependent variable); PBC represents perceived behavioral control.

The findings of the current study reveal a moderate level of intention among participants to attend limited face-to-face classes. This indicates that students enrolled in English subjects at community colleges prefer online classes over face-to-face classes. These students have become accustomed to online learning due to the pandemic and prefer it for several reasons, including its flexibility [31] and convenience [32]. Similarly, a study conducted by Zheng *et al.* [33] found that 80% of students expressed a desire to continue with some form of online instruction, preferably a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online learning, even after the pandemic. With this approach, students no longer need to spend time traveling, especially if they live far from the college [31]. Additionally, students favored live online learning because it can be recorded, offering them greater flexibility in their studies [34].

However, in contrast, a survey reported that 46.2% of respondents wanted to study on campus [19]. Unstable and slow internet connections have contributed to the ineffectiveness of online learning. Furthermore, a study by Alhamami [20] demonstrated that students hold more positive beliefs about PBC regarding language learning in face-to-face settings compared to online settings. The findings indicated that face-to-face language (FLL) classes provide better opportunities for interaction and discussions with instructors than online language-learning (OLL) classes. Additionally, students believe that FLL classes offer more favorable circumstances for asking questions about challenging topics, and they perceive that instructors tend to explain lessons more comprehensively in FLL classes compared to their online counterparts. Another factor, such as stress (both distress and eustress), also affects students' intentions to persist with distance learning [35]. Therefore, it is important to provide adequate support to students to foster a positive learning environment and sustain their interest in distance education.

The results of our study validate Ajzen's theory of planned behavior [36] as a suitable framework for explaining the intention to attend limited face-to-face classes. Among the various predictors, PBC emerged as the most influential factor in determining this intention [37]. This is unsurprising, as if PBC affects behavioral intention towards attending face-to-face classes, it means that an individual's perception of how easy or difficult it is to attend classes in person impacts their intention to do so. In other words, if an individual perceives attending face-to-face classes as relatively easy, they are more likely to have a stronger intention to attend in person. Conversely, if they perceive attending classes in person as difficult or challenging, their intention to attend in person may be weaker. In this study, students perceived that attending online classes is more accessible, convenient, and easier for exam review. In line with this, a study by Zboun and Farrah [38] also reported that ease of access and convenience were key factors influencing students' preference for continuing online learning.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sheds light on students' preferences and intentions regarding limited face-to-face classes versus online learning, specifically within the context of English subjects at a community college. The findings highlight a moderate preference among students for online classes, driven by factors such as flexibility and convenience, especially in the ongoing pandemic. PBC emerged as a key predictor significantly influencing the intention to attend face-to-face classes, thereby supporting theory of planned behavior.

The implications of this study are significant. First, educational institutions should consider students' preferences and comfort levels when designing learning formats. Incorporating blended learning approaches that combine online, and face-to-face components could accommodate diverse preferences while maintaining flexibility. Second, educators need to address students' perceptions of control over their learning environment by removing barriers and providing additional support for in-person attendance, thereby encouraging greater student participation.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations of this study, including its focus on a specific community college setting and discipline, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. External factors, such as the pandemic situation, may have also influenced student preferences during data collection. Future research should explore preferences across various disciplines and institutions, with a focus on integrating blended learning approaches strategically. Faculty training and support will be crucial for effective online instruction, and clear guidelines for developing and delivering blended courses are essential for ensuring consistency and quality. Additionally, using a combination of self-report measures and objective data, along with investigating other factors such as socio-economic backgrounds, can further enhance our understanding of students' learning preferences over time.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

Wei Boon Quah is an education officer of higher learning in Hotel Operation. He holds a Master in Business by Research (Hotel Management) from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Malaysia. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree in the field of Educational Technology with the Department of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia. His research interests include hospitality, tourism, teaching and learning, business management, and education. He is an avid researcher with more than 50 publications in indexed journals, proceedings, chapters in book, newsletters and others. He has obtained RM 50K TVET Applied Research Grant Scheme (T-ARGS) and RM 20k for INTI Seed Grant. He can be contacted at email: skyman823000@yahoo.com.

Krishnavehni Gopal is an educator in the Department of General Studies. She has been in service with Sungai Petani Community College since 2012 till present. She holds a Bachelor Degree in TESL with honors and a Master in English Language Teaching from Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). She can be contacted at email: krishnavehni@gmail.com.