

## The Benefits and Limitations of an Online Qualitative Tracer Study

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### Abstract

A qualitative tracer study of USIM medical graduates' performance in the workplace was conducted by performing face-to-face and focus group interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of the current curriculum. This paper discusses the challenges during the data collection stage and the needs to improve data collection strategies in response to the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) by the Malaysian Government. It will also analyse the benefits and limitations when adjusting the data collection strategies. In the beginning, data collection was administered via face-to-face (individual) and focus group interviews. When the MCO was enforced, the interviews were shifted to online methodology. This online adaptation provided the convenience of scheduling interviews and also comfort to the graduates to participate in their homes that normally had better internet access than in the hospitals. The risk of exposure to COVID-19 through face-to-face interactions was therefore reduced. Although the usage of Microsoft Teams was conducive to online recording, some graduates were not able to access the application during their scheduled interviews. As such, Google Meet was employed instead, and the interviews were recorded by using a voice recorder. Besides, the saving in travelling costs for data collection was significant as the extra budget

Manuscript Received Date: 31/12/20

Manuscript Acceptance Date: 31/05/21

Manuscript Published Date: 19/06/21

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33102/uij.vol33no3.318>



Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia  
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could be allocated for other research expenditure. In this study, Microsoft Teams licence was provided by the university and Google Meet was free of charge. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity for the adoption of an online data collection method that was not reckoned with at the beginning of this study. Online data collection can therefore be considered for both qualitative and quantitative studies in the future.

**Keywords:** *tracer study, graduate performance, online interview, qualitative, cost-saving*

## 1. Introduction

For standards-based education, evaluation of the programme educational outcomes is essential to determine the relevance of the curriculums when the graduates have completed their degrees at their respective alma maters after three to five years. This evaluation, also known as tracer study, is executed for the continuous quality improvement of current curriculums to ensure the programmes offered remain competitive and pertinent to fulfilling the demands of the labour market.

This study examines how medical graduates are able to accomplish the objectives of their programmes. Qualitative data collection was carried out from the graduates, their superiors, colleagues and patients through face-to-face or focus group interviews and was commenced in October 2019.

When the Malaysian Movement Control Order (MCO) was in effect in March 2020, all research activities were halted apropos of preventing the spread of COVID-19. As a result, face-to-face (individual) or focus group interviews were no longer feasible as long as the MCO was still in force. Due to the uncertainty of the cessation of MCO or pandemic, an alternative method for data collection was therefore imperative. Thus, this article will discuss and elaborate on the experience in conducting online interviews specifically the practicalities, benefits and limitations of performing the qualitative interviews online via selected video conferencing applications.

## 2. Material and methods

The literature on online surveys is abundant in comparison to that of online interviews for qualitative research due to online surveys have been conducted for at least two decades. Reported benefits of online surveys include higher accessibility of large, geographically distributed populations, faster completion rate, ease of data entry, better anonymity, time-saving and enhanced cost-effectiveness (Cantrell & Lupinacci, 2007; Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Hunter, 2012; Lefever, Dal, & Matthíasdóttir, 2007; Ward, Clark, Zabriskie, & Morris, 2012). Nonetheless, its limitations include potential sampling and measurement errors, non-representative samples as well as variations in the instrument reliability (Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Ward et al., 2012).

From a certain perspective, online interviews could simulate an authentic environment similar to face-to-face interviews. On top of that, online interviews may also overcome geographical dispersion, physical mobility boundaries as well as time and financial constraints (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). Phone interviews could also offer the same benefits (Sanip, 2020) for individual interviews; however, it is not feasible for focus groups.

At present, there are many video conferencing applications available online. These applications including Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Webex or Zoom are uncomplicated for online interviews and they have different appealing features. For instance, some have unlimited time for video conferencing, but no recording is allowed, whereas some have limited time but the function of video recording is available. The feasibility of using video conferencing application for both individual and focus group interviews have been demonstrated by Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour in 2014 when they utilised Skype for their research (Janghorban et al., 2014). A recent study also highlighted the participants' predilection for online interviews via Zoom compared to other methods such as face-to-face physically, telephone and so on (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019).

The researchers of this study were familiar with Microsoft Teams that was subscribed to and provided by the university. However, when running Microsoft Teams for an online focus group interview, the participants of this study, who were not part of the institution could not log into the meeting room of the application despite being added as guests prior to the stipulated meeting time. Therefore, the researchers had to choose another application – Google Meet because every participant had a personal Google account and they did not have to install the application into their devices to avoid further delay of the interviews. Unfortunately, the basic subscription to Google Meet did not allow video recording (Google Meet Help, n.d.). Consequently, a voice recorder was employed for transcription later. Apart from that, the researchers also had difficulty in enrolling the other participants in Microsoft Teams for focus group interviews. Upon discussion, the usage of Zoom's free version was consented to as it allowed video recording as well.

### **3. Benefits of online interviews**

#### *Availability of video conferencing applications*

There is a wide variety of video conferencing applications available in the market nowadays compared to five years ago. These applications such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Webex and Zoom are user-friendly for the researchers and the participants. The free version of these applications is also good enough for an online interview. Prior to choosing which application to employ for the interviews, researchers are encouraged to be familiar with the respective features. It is also helpful to subscribe to more than one application in case of any aforementioned difficulty during the scheduled interview time.

#### *Ease of interview scheduling*

Online face-to-face and focus group interviews are also straightforward to schedule. For instance, the researchers could arrange three different individual interviews in a day with three participants separated hundreds of kilometres away. This scheduling would not be realisable for physical face-to-face interviews as the researchers would need at least a day to travel from one participant to another. Similarly, a focus group interview can easily be performed with participants who are geographically dispersed across a state or the country.

#### *Rapport*

Rapport is a fundamental component of qualitative research. It is established on respect and trust between the researchers and participants. Without good rapport, the data collected may lack the

depth and richness of participants' narratives, thus reducing the data quality (Weller, 2017). Rapport is easier developed when the video is turned on throughout the interview where the researchers are able to observe participants' countenances and vice versa.

#### ***Ability to read facial expression***

Online interviews also enable interviewers to read participants' facial expressions. This is informative for the researchers to look for cues of what the participants are not comfortable with when sensitive questions are posed to them.

#### ***Convenience of interview recording***

The video conferencing applications with video recording function allow the interviews to be recorded with ease for later transcription. The researchers could fully concentrate on the conversation without having to take extensive notes simultaneously as the recordings could always be referred to during data analysis. This is especially useful during focus group interviews. The researchers could easily keep track of which participants had mentioned important points by playing back the recordings.

#### ***Higher participation rate***

Online interviews also increase the rate of participation. Participants can join focus group interviews either from their workplaces or homes with comfort. They do not have to travel to a specific venue for the interview.

#### ***Feasibility of physical distancing***

When focus group interviews are conducted face-to-face, participants will normally sit close to each other in a circle. This arrangement makes physical distancing difficult to achieve. However, when focus group interviews are conducted online, physical distancing amongst the participants is automatically attained as participants will remain at their own places. The risk of exposure to COVID-19 through physical interaction is therefore significantly diminished.

#### ***Ability to conduct interviews out of office hours***

The online approach also permits interviews to be conducted outside office hours. However, this arrangement has to be mutually agreed upon between the researchers and the participants. Nevertheless, the safety of both researchers and participants can be guaranteed as they do not have to travel on their own at night.

#### ***Ability to be at different locations***

As described earlier, online interviews enable researchers and participants to be at different locations and time zones at the same time. They can choose a venue with good internet connectivity and less noise distraction. This will ensure the smooth progress of the interviews.

### ***Research cost-effectiveness***

The most valuable benefit of online interviews is the economising of research expenses (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey, & McEvoy, 2020; Sanip, 2020; Weller, 2017). A budget that was previously allocated for travel and accommodation to meet with the participants can now be channelled to other aspects of the research expenditure. The time needed to travel from one interviewing venue to another is also saved as the researchers only require to end one online interview before proceeding with another within several minutes.

## **4. Limitations of online interviews**

### ***Familiarity with online interview application***

The knowledge of both researchers and participants on the operation of video conferencing applications is a prerequisite for an online interview to run smoothly. They are required to have a certain comprehension of the process of application login as well as familiarity with the audio and video buttons. As such, researchers must confirm participants' acquaintance with the chosen application. If participants are not well versed in a particular application, it is advisable to provide guidance to the participants before and during the interview or to opt for other methods of data collection.

### ***Compatibility of the application***

As illustrated above, the application chosen may not be compatible with all participants. Therefore, it is preferable to check the compatibility of the applications with all participants prior to the scheduled dates and timings of the interviews. If a problem arises and researchers have to select another application during the interviews, this might lead to delays of interviews and loss of time especially when the participants have subsequent engagements after the interviews.

### ***Limited ability to read body language***

Commonly, the visual display of an online interview is limited to the face. There are also instances in this study wherein the video has to be switched off to save internet bandwidth. As a result, the ability of the researchers to read body language is restricted to only facial expression and occasionally only voice when the video is not permissible.

### ***Internet stability***

In order to ensure rapport is formed during the online interviews, good and stable internet connectivity is critical (Weller, 2017). Internet disruption during the interviews will cause a disturbance to the flow of thoughts of the researchers and the participants. It will also lead to bias in data collection when only the participants with good internet connectivity are able to convey their opinions freely.

## 5. Conclusion

The MCO to curb the spread of COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity for online data collection that was not considered at the beginning of the study. Prior to conducting an online interview, a thorough and critical review of literature on the practicalities, benefits and limitations of any chosen method is necessary. It is also advisable to choose more than one video conferencing application to account for non-compatibility issues during the interviews. Given the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic on when it would end and also the possibility of another MCO in the future, researchers should consider having online interview as an alternative method of data collection for qualitative and mixed methods research in the future.

## Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge our participants for their contribution to this study. We would also like to thank the university for awarding a special research grant (PPPI/KHAS\_FPSK/051007/13819) to conduct the study. The ethical approval was obtained from the university ethical committee (USIM/JKEP/2019-72).

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