



ELECTRONIC EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS LEARNERS' COMMUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION (E-ESSENCE)

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ABSTRACT

E-ESSENCE or Electronic Emotional and Social Support for Special Educational Needs Learners Community in Higher Education aim to provide emotional and social support for Special Educational Needs (SEN) learners in higher education institutions (HEIs) via an online platform. In this study, E-ESSENCE is demonstrated using the Model of Technology Supported Learning for SEN Learners in Malaysian HEIs. Thus, the purpose of this article is to discuss the effect on emotional and social supports for SEN learners in Malaysian using E-ESSENCE. Findings shows that E-ESSENCE is among the most used technology-supported learning and it is also complementing the development of the SEN community. Hence, it is indirectly enhancing the SEN learners' positive self-development within the HEIs community. The use of E-ESSENCE should be encouraged yet monitored to maximise its impact among SEN learners in the HEIs community. Future research is warranted to focus on how E-ESSENCE can be further developed and enhance.

Keywords: Special Educational Needs (SEN); Persons with Disabilities (PWDs); Higher Education; Technology-Supported Learning; Inclusive Education

INTRODUCTION

Support is vital in ensuring that learning processes can run efficiently. Support is also one of the elements besides stability and connectedness, to ensure that learners succeed in their education (Alias, 2015). As highlighted by the Center for Medical Health in Schools (2002), learning supports refer to “resources, strategies and practices that provide physical, social, emotional and intellectual supports intended to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school” (p.1). Thus, based on the definition, learning supports could be characterized into four classifications, i.e. physical supports, social supports, emotional supports and intellectual supports (Alias, 2015). In this paper two, support elements will be emphasized - social supports and emotional supports.

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The roles of social and emotional supports in learning

There is no clear view on the use of the terms for social and emotional supports in learning. Some researchers regard social and emotional as different entities, yet interrelated (Ingleton, 1999; Osher, Sprague, Weissberg et al., 2005; Protheroe, 2007; Regan, 2003). While House (1981), in contrast, perceived emotional support as social support including informational support, appraisal support and instrumental support. Meanwhile, Scott (2002) as cited in Alias (2015) categorizes emotional support along with esteem support, informational support and tangible support, which may lead to the formation of social support. In this paper, emotional and social supports are classified as one category because they are interrelated in explaining support in learning. This is supported by Osher et al. (2005), who agrees that the learning process is both individual and social. Therefore, emotion and social aspects may not be separated as they are connected to each other. Osher et al. (2005) underline the importance of emotional and social supports in teaching and learning. Four social and emotional conditions are identified to have an impact on learning, namely: safety, support, challenge, and social-emotional support.

In addition, Taylor and MacKenney (2008), Protheroe (2007), and Ingleton (1999), stressed that negative emotional experience may hinder learning process, while positive emotional experience will support learning. Furthermore, as stressed by Protheroe (2007), emotional support is very important for learners who are prone to fail in higher education institutions. By providing adequate emotional support, it could improve the learners' academic performance in HEIs (Alias, 2015). In terms of social support, Mohammad and Suhaili (2011) and, Abdullah and Jaafar (2011), highlight the importance of parental and community involvement to support the education of SEN learners in HEIs.

One of the ways to provide social and emotional support is through online communities or electronic communities (e-communities). As highlighted by Hiltz and Wellman (1997), online communities do not only provide social and emotional support, but also information, as well as a sense of belonging. Mentor (2011) further elaborates that social connectedness is "the degree of interpersonal trust, attachment security, social competency, and a sense of belonging" (p.1). As proposed by Mentor (2011), and Daves and Roberts (2010), social media can promote social connectedness among the learners particularly in higher education. Additionally, Daves and Roberts (2010) suggest that HEIs may foster social connectedness via the creation of learning communities through the readily available social networking tools such Facebook, MySpace and virtual environments.

In Malaysia, the HEIs learners recognize social networking as important tools in providing social and academic connectedness with their friends, lecturers as well as HEIs administration (Omar, Embi, & Yunus, 2012; Hussain, 2012). It was also found that more than 80% of 6538 learners in Malaysian HEIs reported that social media was beneficial for their informal learning processes (Hamat et al., 2012). The HEIs learners reported that they used social media to interact with their friends for academic issues including seeking help from their course-mates on the academic matters as well as arranging appointment for group discussions (Hamat et al., 2012). In addition, Embi, Gabarre, Gabarre, Hamat, and Din (2014) found that 2528 out of 2731 HEIs students in Malaysia who participated in their study reported that they spent more than two hours a day on social networking. And the findings of the same study also show that the students interacted mostly with their friends and course-mates via social network.

Meanwhile, HEIs should create an inclusive environment for all students so that no one will be left out in pursuing higher education (Alias, 2015). Creating an inclusive environment for learning will accommodate the SEN learners to learn along with the non-SEN learners Alias, 2015). As highlighted by Adams and Holland (2006), there are two important aspects that could nurture SEN learners' achievement in HEIs which are trouble-free transition in education journey and educational aspirations. Trouble-free transition is when the SEN learners are barrier-free in their educational journey starting from their pre-school up to tertiary level (Adams & Holland, 2006). While the educational aspirations as explained by Adams and Holland (2006) come in many forms such as supportive parents and teachers, helpful friends as well as inclusive environments.

In addition, one of the main requests by SEN learners in Malaysian HEIs is learning support (Alias, Alias, Ibrahim, Attan & Kadir, 2012). In their exploratory study involving 66 SEN learners from eight Malaysian public HEIs, Alias et al. (2012) found that support system including learning environment and community are really needed by the SEN learners to endure in their education journey in HEIs. Thus, based on the literature review, it can be concluded that social and emotional supports are among the vital elements for the HEIs learners particularly SEN learners to sustain in their educational journey.

Furthermore, one of the best ways for SEN learners to endure in their educational journey at the HEIs is via personalized learning. As highlighted by Redding (2013), personalized learning may take place in various forms and pace and “tailored to the student’s interests and preferences”. When the HEIs learners especially SEN learners received adequate support especially from the emotional and social aspects, it will increase their motivation to learn (Keppell, 2014). This will help them to sustain and personalized their learning according to their needs and circumstances (Keppell, 2014).

Thus, this paper will further discuss on the emotional and social supports for SEN learners in Malaysian HEIs.

Why E-ESSENCE?

E-ESSENCE is the exemplification of the Model of Technology Supported Learning for Special Educational Needs Learners in Malaysian Higher Education (Alias et al., 2015). To date, it can be considered as the comprehensive Model for SEN learners in Malaysian HEIs (Alias, 2015).

The development and validation of the Model itself involved of two rigorous phases. The Phase One of the Model is the development of the Model Prototype based on the two needs assessments of the 66 SEN learners from eight Malaysian public HEIs and 8 individuals who have direct contact with persons with disabilities (PWDs). The focus of these two needs assessments was to examine the challenges, barriers and needs of PWDs particularly in HEIs. Then, content analysis on the eight Malaysian HEIs websites proceeded as the foundation of the development of the Model Prototype with the guidance of the literature review.

The Phase Two of the Model is the Model Validation. Here, the Model Prototype which had been developed earlier based on the two needs assessments, content analysis and the literature review was validated via Delphi Technique. Eleven heterogeneous subject matter experts (SMEs) were chosen from four different fields including Instructional Technology, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Special Education and Inclusive Education as well as SMEs who have direct contact with PWDs. The consensus among the SMEs on the feasibility of the Model to be used in HEIs was reached at the Round Two of the Delphi technique. After that, E-ESSENCE was chosen to exemplify the Model of Technology Supported Learning for SEN Learners in Malaysian HEIs. E-ESSENCE is one of the sub-components of the Model. The summary of the phases of the Model is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

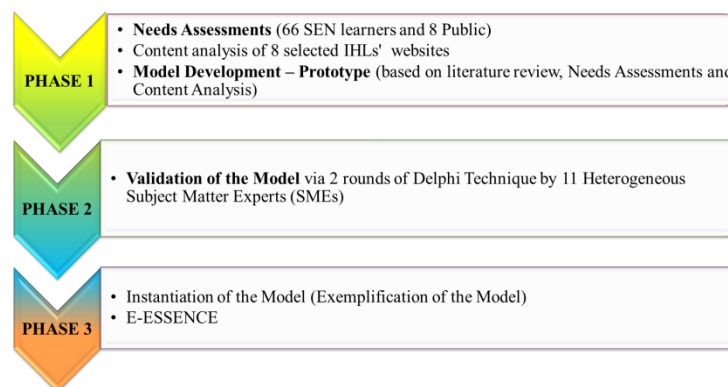


Figure 1. The Process of Model Development

E-ESSENCE is an exemplification of the Model of Technology Supported Learning for SEN Learners in Malaysian HEIs. As shown in Figure 2, the Model comprises of six important components which are Academic Affairs Database, Student Affairs Database, Library Database, University Administration Database, Community, Industrial Networking and Alumni Database as well as Special Department or Unit for SEN Learners Database.

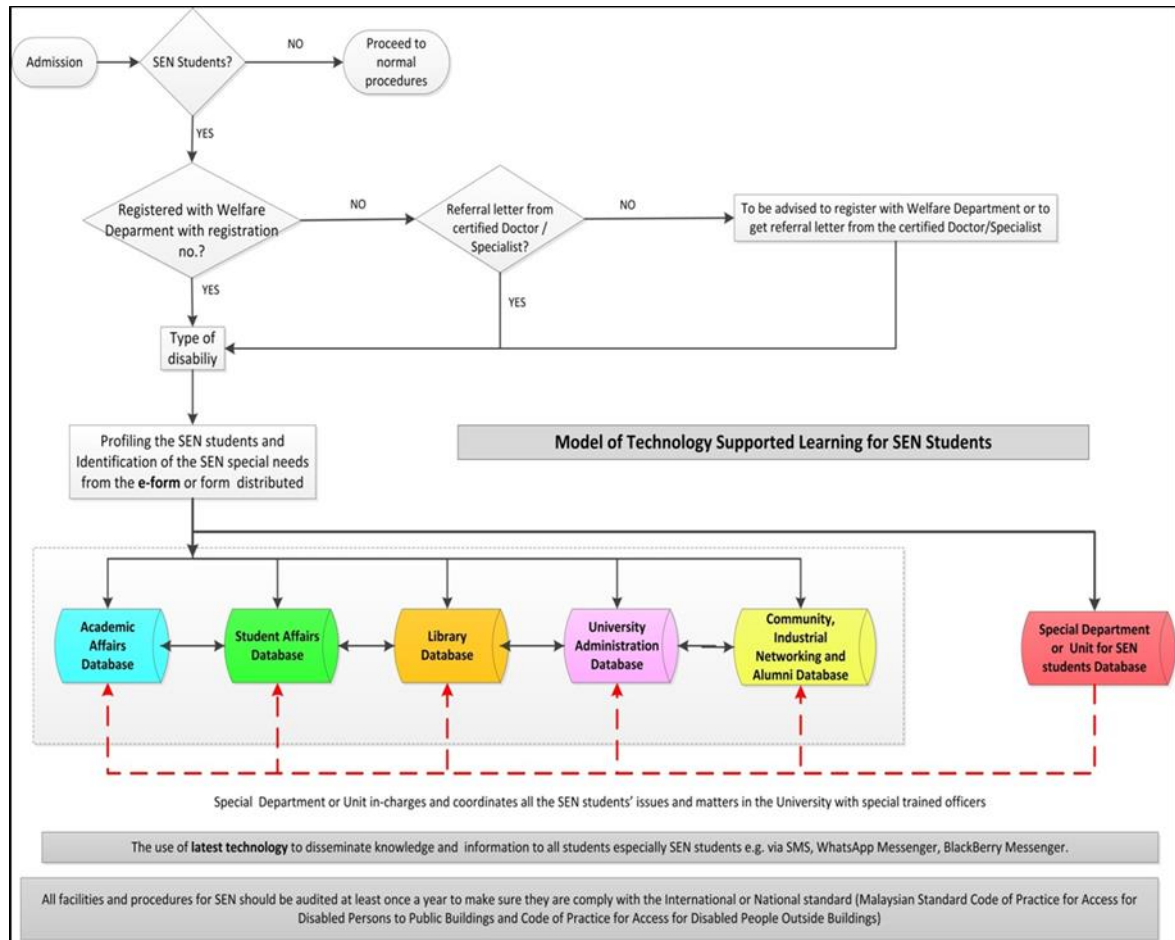


Figure 2. The Model of Technology Supported Learning for SEN Learners in Malaysian HEIs

E-ESSENCE is one of the sub-components of the Special Department or Unit for SEN Learners Database i.e. e-groups. The main concentration of E-ESSENCE is to exemplify the Model of Technology Supported Learning for SEN Learners in addressing challenges and barriers faced by SEN learners in HEIs by focusing on the social and emotional support components. As has been discussed earlier, besides stability and connectedness, support is one of the essentials that could foster success among learners in their education and life (National Association of School Psychologists, 2010).

The idea of E-ESSENCE is supported by Hiltz and Wellman (1997), Osher et al. (2005), Protheroe (2007), Jensen (2011), Alias and Alias (2012) and Alias (2015) who found that emotional and social supports are among the vital elements in fostering positive self-development among SEN learners so that they could successfully endure their education journey in HEIs.

As has been suggested by the SEN learners during the Phase One via the need assessment, to sustain in HEIs, they need support group among themselves and community (Alias, 2015). Hence, e-groups or in this study it is known as E-ESSENCE is proposed as a sub-component of the Special Department or Unit for SEN Learners Database. Social media has been chosen to exemplify the E-ESSENCE in providing emotional and social supports for SEN learners. One of the reasons for choosing social media is due to its features that offer SEN learners beyond the emotional and social supports (Alias, 2015). Besides providing the support needed, it also offers information and at the same time fostering a sense of belonging among the SEN learners (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997).

METHODOLOGY

There are various types of well-known social media and these include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp as well as Telegram. For the purpose of the exemplification of the Model, Facebook was chosen. Facebook was selected due to its renowned functions in connecting people virtually from all over the world

in an effective and efficient way (Alias, 2015). As the largest social networking community in the world, Facebook plays an important role in the personal as well as the social life of HEIs learners (Bugeja, 2006; Hussain, 2012; Omar et al., 2012; Selwyn, 2009).

According to statistics, Malaysia is ranked as 8th in Asia and 21st in the world in terms of Facebook users (Talip, 2013). Up to May 2013, there were about 13.3 million Malaysian Facebook users and 34.5% of the Facebook users were between 18 and 24 years old (Talip, 2013). Thus, this shows that Facebook is a popular social media in Malaysia. In addition, as highlighted by Wilson, Gosling and Graham (2012), the main function of Facebook is connecting people. It provides rich observable data through expressive status updates and uploaded materials. Thus, Facebook provides chances for the social scientists to study human behaviour which were previously difficult to research such as making friend and social interactions (Wilson et al., 2012).

For the purpose of exemplification, the SEN learners from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) were selected. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) was chosen due to its features of being the largest HEI with the largest SEN learners in Malaysia. Two types of Facebook (FB) accounts were created, namely the Closed Group account exclusively for the SEN learners in UiTM and the Facebook Page account for the public, including the UiTM SEN learners, UiTM non-SEN learners, the UiTM staff as well as non-UiTM FB users. Both FB accounts use the same name, i.e. UiTM Support and Caring Group for the Disabled. Both FB accounts were set up on the 3rd of March 2013.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Closed Facebook Group

The aims of this group was to act as a bridge to connect the SEN learners in UiTM from all over Malaysia, to promote good relationships among SEN learners as well as to encourage SEN learners to share information, particularly on the PWDs issues in Malaysia. The content analysis was conducted thoroughly by analyzing users' interactions, including their postings, the replies or responses to the issues discussed as well as their indirect participation by seeing the postings. Three main themes emerged from the participations and interactions among the users, i.e. inquiry, sharing information and lurking. Sharing information is among the main activities of the members of the FB Closed Group members. Various forms of information are uploaded on the FB Closed Group including articles, personal sharing and video clips.

In addition, the members of UiTM Support and Caring Group for Disabled also utilized this e-group to inquire about SEN related issues such as financial matters and job opportunities for SEN learners. Not all members actively took part in the FB Closed Group via postings. Based on the analysis done on each topic posted, the majority of the group members were lurking at the information shared even though they did not actively participate in sharing or responding to the topic discussed. This could be seen from their 'viewing' as well as their 'LIKE' activities of the topic discussed, for instance as presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3. An example of lurking activity

The Facebook Page

The objectives of this page were to disseminate information related to PWDs specifically in UiTM and generally in Malaysia, to spread the activities conducted in UiTM as well as to create awareness among the public on the PWDs issues. Hence, by doing this, the public can be one of the support systems for the SEN learners in HEIs specifically in UiTM. As this is a FB page, everybody in the cyberspace could access it and currently 326 Facebook users “liked” the page. The Facebook users who “liked” the page were from various backgrounds including UiTM SEN learners, non-SEN learners as well as the staff. In addition, this e-group is also supported by the public.

The main activity in this Facebook Page is sharing information. Three categories of sharing activities were identified, including (i) sharing information, (ii) sharing on PWDs issues as well as (iii) sharing on the motivational and inspirational stories of PWDs. The information was shared in various forms, including webpage link, video clip, photos, and in writing form. The content analysis was done to see whether the users really benefited from this e-group. Again, the users’ interactions were analyzed systematically. The users’ activities on the FB Page were examined, including their responses and comments on the issues discussed as well as their indirect participation through lurking. In addition, their private messages to the e-group administrators were also scrutinized. Three themes emerged from the participations and interactions among the e-group users, i.e. lurking, inquiry and invitation. Lurking is the most prevalent activities among the Facebook users on the Facebook Page. Three types of lurking activities were identified, i.e., “Like” activities, “View” activities and “Share” activities (Figure 4). This shows that even though Facebook users were not visibly interacting in Facebook Page, they were reading and were aware of the information and issues shared on the Page.



Figure 4. Examples of Like, View and Share Activities

In addition, the Facebook Page (UiTM Support and Caring Group for the Disabled) was also recognized by the public. This could be seen from the invitation received from one of the PWDs support associations to collaborate with children with disabilities issues via private message as shown in Figure 5.

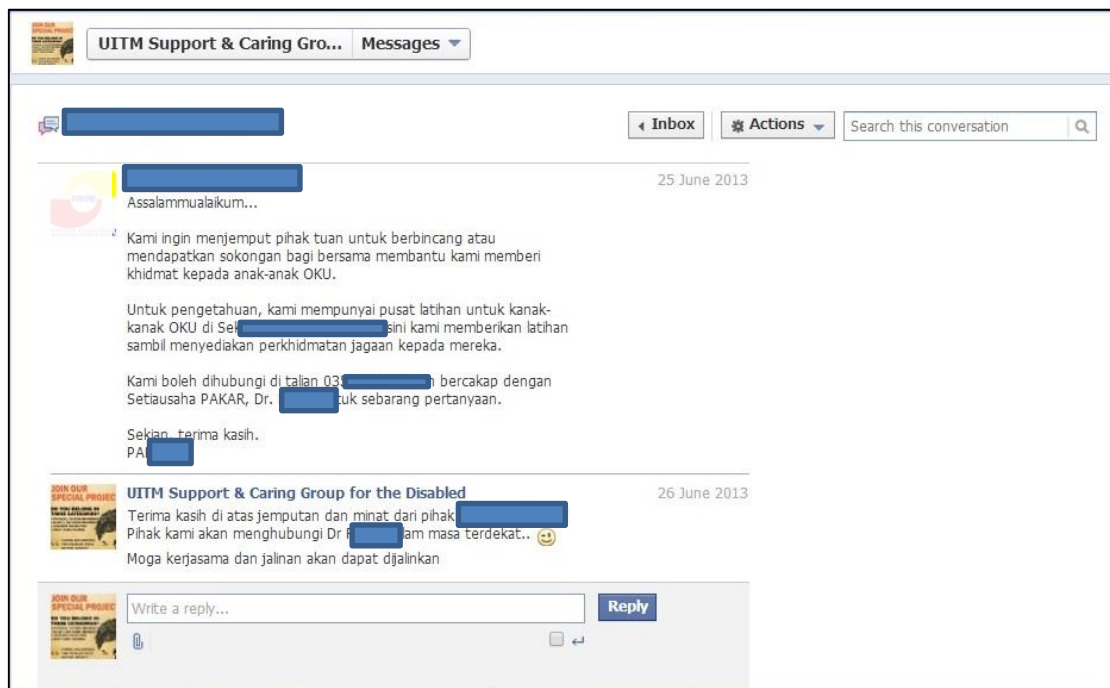


Figure 5. An invitation from one of the PWDs support associations to collaborate

CONCLUSION

E-ESSENCE has gained positive feedback from Facebook users. The Facebook Page also received positive feedback from the public. Thus, based on the content analysis done on both e-groups (E-ESSENCE), it could be concluded that E-ESSENCE (in this study it refers to both FB Closed Group and FB Page), could be a useful technology supported learning for the SEN learners particularly in HEIs. This is in line with the recommendation by the SEN learners which highlighted that support system such as knowing each other and having a good relationship among them are vital in undergoing their life as learners in IHLs. The support system as recommended was materialized through the E-ESSENCE and in the current study, the FB Closed Group (UiTM Support and Caring Group for the Disabled) was created. Furthermore, the E-ESSENCE has also met its purposes in providing a good support system particularly in emotional and social supports by connecting the SEN learners with the public via the Facebook Page (UiTM Support and Caring Group for the Disabled). As E-ESSENCE is an efficient tool in disseminating information, it could be regarded as effective technology supported learning specifically in enhancing social collaboration, affection and community support for SEN learners in HEIs.

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