

# Covid-19 Conundrum and The Lived Experiences of Final-Year Students

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# Covid-19 Conundrum and The Lived Experiences of Final-Year Students

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## Abstract

Overarching research on Covid-19 pandemic are predominated by science-medical research area. There is a lacuna of research addressing the social dimension of pandemic in everyday lives. This research utilised Heideggerian heremeneutic phenomenology to address the question of "how do final-years students deal with the pandemic and how do they make sense of it through their lived experiences". Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were generated to interview 24 final-year university students. Towards the findings and discussion, it is revealed that two major themes emerged: challenges and disappointments. Participants cited supervision problems along with unsupportive home situations and loneliness/isolation as challenges during this pandemic. This research also explored the way in which a sense of disappointment lies within the displacement of living events such as the loss of spatial identity which being represented by the university spaces to the missed chance of having graduation ceremonies. Covid-19 pandemic is a spiralled conundrum wherein the physical dimension of health often eclipse the mental-psychological dimension. This research demonstrates that lasting effect of the pandemic stretches beyond materiality discourses of public health. The social dimensions of the everyday living experiences should be taken into consideration for policy makers, including Universities' boards when formulating the higher-education policies during these pandemic.

## Keywords:

Student ; Covid-19; Lived; Experience; Final-year; University

## Introduction

Following the WHO declaration of <sup>41</sup>Corona Virus Disease 2019 (caused by Sars-cov-2 virus) as pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020), higher education institutions around the world embarked on uncharted territories (Ducharme, 2020). All academic activities including teaching, supervising and examining were abruptly changed to full-blown online using video converence technologies and other technology platforms. Unesco warned that digital divide is still becoming the biggest issue in education since roughly more than half population in the world have no accessed to Internet (Unesco, 2020). Even if they do have access to Internet, this sudden and radical changes from offline to online work-from-home policies which being adopted

in many countries has made academic process meet its biggest challenge yet. Research on the basis of Covid-19 have often (so far) in favoured of medical and public health areas, therefore it is pertinent to fill this lacuna of research from the side of social dimension of a pandemic. This study focused upon the lived experience of final-year students who from our initial observation, suffer the most in comparison to their younger counterparts. Final year requires independent work in which students must produce written thesis and being examined as a requirement for graduation. Student in the final-years also usually need deeper attention and closer relationship to their supervisors. Nevertheless, this pandemic halted one of the most important phase in producing final thesis. This paper poses central question of how do final-year students deal with the pandemic and how do they make sense of it through their lived experiences. The next section elaborates the overarching literatures and methods that informed the development this research.

### **Literature Review**

While there is a very limited research undertook specifically on the Covid-19 pandemic, most research falls in the medical science area. There hasn't been any research on Covid-19 (at least not yet scholarly published) highlighting the social impact of this pandemic especially on the university students. Apart from several newspapers reports, this research fills the lacuna of research on how Covid-19 pandemic affecting university students. This research proposes questions of how do final-years students deal with the pandemic and how do they make sense of it through their lived-experiences. This research defined 'experience' as something that any student being exposed to during their final-years of University. It could also means how they interpret, give meaning and build sense of awareness of such condition and exposure. Literatures have been considerably robust in the field of students challenge and wellness towards their university degree. Though not specifically focused upon the challenge of Pandemic, such literatures still pertinent as analytical tools for this research.

### **Final-Year Students Experiences**

Several research on the field of education, pedagogies and psychology have provided useful literatures on final-years students' experiences. While the majority of universities in Indonesia mandate students to conduct research on their final-years and provide written thesis or dissertation, universities abroad had made distinction between honours and non-honours degrees. Students who choose honours degree usually have to conduct research within their final years. Research shown that self-efficacy is the most distinctive factor that determined students succeedingly conducting their final-years research (Shaw et al., 2013). Similar research undertook in Australia towards 295 students also shown that male rather than female students

had higher self-efficacy characteristic and thus made connection between the lower number of female pursuing post-graduate education in the future. Similar research also being conducted in the UK with a sample of over 5000 students across the natural science, social sciences and humanities which resulted that research students achieved better grades compared to teaching-based programme, especially for the disadvantage students (Parker, 2018). This research concludes that the success of conducting research provide students with better chance to apply for doctoral degree.

However, research on the subject of university students, although not specifically on final-years students, also found numerous problems could arise along with students dealing their academic years, from communication problems with their lecturers/supervisors, mental health, anxiety and academic stress. Large scale study in the US comprising of 8,977 students from 20 colleges concluded that stress has been cited as the academic impediment for the majority of students (Frazier et al., 2018). The research concluded that students who declared their stress and anxiety have indeed lower GPAs compared to those who didn't. The other study on Australian law students and other vocational studies found that academic demands, career pressure, social isolation and study/life balance are all contributing factors in students' stress-levels (Putwain, 2007; Bergin & Pakenham, 2014; Sotardi, 2018). Similar research by Akgun and Ciarrochi (2003) identified causes of academic stress including exams, assignments, time pressure, grade pressure and future uncertainty. Akgun and Ciarrochi (2003) using the term 'learned resourcefulness' to describe the ability to manage pressure and stress, similar to 'self-efficacy' that being extrapolated earlier by Shaw (Shaw et al., 2013).

A study conducted in England proposed the urgency to conduct stress and anxiety tests to students (elementary and higher-education) to have better understanding of supporting student mental health and well-being (Robotham & Julian, 2006; Chapman & Orb, 2015; Frazier et al., 2018). Robotham and Julian (2006) also warned student mental health is considered under research and pale in comparison to the more robust research on adult mental health. Several research also made cases around the issue of student-supervisor relationship as a contributing factor for final-year students in finishing their research projects. Research from Karpouza & Emvalotis (2018) formulated the complex dynamics of these student and higher education teachers. They generated that although teachers "hierarchical superiority", teacher-student relationships are genuinely reciprocal in the sense of "mutually wanting to relate and being responsible for maintaining relationship, overcoming obstacles, maintaining boundaries and experiencing the positive outcomes" (p. 15). An influential research by Frymier & Houser (2013) highlighted two important skills the higher education teachers should possess in maintaining successful teacher-student relationships (TSR), which are referential skills and ego support. Furthermore, the paper illustrates referential skills as "effectively explaining the teaching content" while ego supports as "meeting the students emotional need and motivating them to succeed" (p. 216).

Similar recommendations were made in other study on <sup>37</sup>teacher-student relationship that TSR <sup>39</sup>should be regarded as a “relevant construct in higher education since it clearly affects students’ successful study progress” (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Kollath-Cattano et al., 2017; Huet & Casanova, 2020). These research in overall stated that communication and interpersonal connection between students and teachers is significantly determined the success of academic study and should not be taken for granted (Macfadyen et al., 2019).

## Lived Experiences

Research on <sup>39</sup>lived experience is at the heart of phenomenology tradition. Derived from existentialist philosophy, phenomenology concerns with what it means of ‘being human’. While there are various scholars, phenomenology could be divided into two school of thoughts, the work of Edmund Husserl and the work of Martin Heidegger. The former, based on the work of Husserl, believes that scholars should separate their beliefs in search of participants’ experiences, while the latter following the work of Martin Heidegger, seen scholars’ own experiences and interpretation as an integral part of interpretation and analytical process (Mapp, 2008).

Heidegger laid the foundational aspect heremeneutic phenomenology by proposing the basic question of “what does the meaning of being?” in his influential work, *Being and Time* (1962). Continuing the philosophical work of Plato and Aristotle, Heidegger <sup>22</sup>posed important question of what it means to be a human being and thus “revealing primary and experiential meanings of what it always already is to be a human in everyday life” (Spier, 2018, p. 30). To be able to have a whole understanding of one’s lived-experiences, phenomenology researchers usually treat participants interview as stories. van Manen (2007 cited in Spier, 2018) enlists lived experience as series of narratives or stories of:

- <sup>1</sup> 1. A person’s detailed description of a past experience
2. usually conveys one particular event or incident
3. A person’s description of the experience from the inside, the feelings, the mood, the lingering effects of the event, etc.
4. Includes important concrete detail
5. Often contains several quotes (what was said, done, etc.)
6. Avoids causal explanations, generalisations or abstract interpretations
7. Is told in conversational and accessible language rather than fancy phrases or academic terminology.

Using phenomenology to reveal lived-experience could be regarded as highly descriptive, subjective and reflective (Conklin, 2014; Hall et al., 2016). However, different from other forms of qualitative methodology such as narrative inquiries and



ethnography, phenomenology focused on 'human experience' that plays into details while at the same time describing the inherently senses and awareness of being 'something', which in turns producing a level of attention and empathy that usually lacks in other qualitative methods (Zahavi, 2012).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology is a popular method used in research in educational field, for example the work of Joshua Spier (2018) which heavily informed this research. In the book, Spier asked the central question of "what does it means to be an educators?", following the interviews with 12 university educators, Spier concluded that his research actively promoting "the culture of listening" not only from the side of educators but also University's leaders and policy makers. The next section lays the ground for methods chosen in this research.

## Methods

The phenomenological tradition informed the direction of this research. Far from just merely a research method, phenomenology is a philosophical branch that questioning human's experiences and stream of consciousness from the first person's point of view. Rooted in qualitative methodology, phenomenology could be describe as "an inquiry to describe a lived experienced" because it explore the state of being in the world through the thoughts of who experience it (Mapp, 2008). Some researchers stated phenomenology as "writing the pain" since it dwelve into "first person phenomenological accounts" (Finlay, 2012). To be broadly categorised, phenomenology is divided into Husserlian and Hiedeggerian (Hall et al., 2016).

This research follows the Heideggerian phenomenological account since researchers involved in this study also provide their own experiences of working under Covid-19 pandemic. We believe that our own experiences as researchers and lecturers will enrich the understanding and interpretation of students lived experiences. Roberts and Taylor (cited in Miles et al., 2015) suggested lived experience as "the knowledge humans have of how it is to live a life in regards to being someone or something unique in everyday situations". Furthermore, researchers also suggest analysing lived experience as "peeling the onion" process in a way that data should be read carefully and meaning should be interpreted in the most emphatic way to have a whole look on the embodied or lived experiences of those who participate in the research (Miles et al., 2015).

Two focus group discussions with each six participants and twelve indepth-interviews are employed as data collection methods. In the end, twenty four final-year students are being interviewed whose ages and semesters are varied. Although most participants are on their 8<sup>th</sup> semesters, we also interviewed students on their 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> semesters. Students ages are also varied from 21 years old to almost 24 years old.

Indepth-interviews and FGDs were being conducted solely through video conference technology, Zoom, and the interviews were each approximately run from 30 to 60 minutes. All students (16 females and 8 males) agreed to be recorded and written by their actual names, however we have decided to use initials to protect their privacies. Participants often times also talked in a more open and relaxed manners once they were informed that initials will be used instead of their real names. A set of interview guidelines is prepared although interviews often follows the conversation dynamics. This research also briefly interviewed three lecturers and supervisors to gain their own accounts of academic working during the pandemic.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that although the term used in this research refer to “final-year” students, the more appropriate term would be the “last-semester” students. Since academic years in the majority of Indonesian universities divided into semesters rather than years, this research specifically generated interviews from last-semester students. All students interviewed in this study were doing their final research without any coursework left. <sup>31</sup> It is also important to note that all students living with their families instead of in the students accomodation (*kos-kosan*) and dormitories (*asrama*). This paper also used the term undergraduate thesis or undergraduate dissertation interchangeably to refer to final-research report that students must produce in order to graduate or more popularly known in Indonesia as *skripsi*.

Furthermore, this research acknowledges its limitation that video conference is not ideal in capturing students lived experiences, let alone in the form of group discussions. Phenemenology often times in favoured of one-on-one interview instead of group discussion (Mapp, 2015). However, Covid-19 pandemic is a extraordinary experience where participants also admitted to being happy to participate in this research since could see their friends in video conference. The FGD forums, in turn, provided some sort of happy space for participants to engage in conversation and telling their own account of experience among their peers who were separated because of work-from-home policy. The conversation flew smoothly, often times defied the interview guidelines since the participants seemingly enjoyed to tell their stories. Phenomenological tradition that put emphasis of people ‘viewpoints’ allows us to asked open-ended questions such as “how are you feeling doing work during the pandemic?” or “tell us about your family members” thus makes the interview emphatically conducted in participants own pace rather than research team’s agenda.

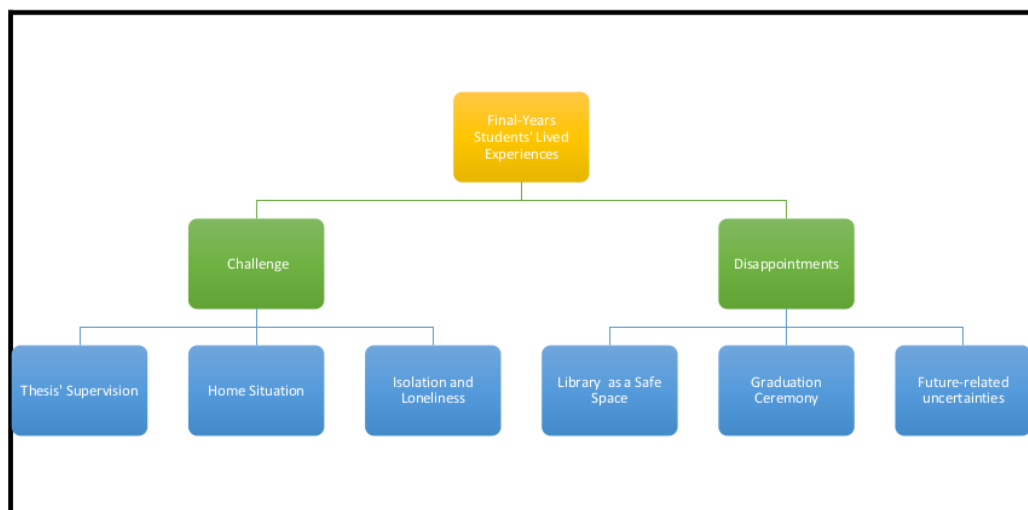
Precedural steps proposed by van Manen (cited in Spier 2018) in the afermentioned section heavily inducted in the interviewing process. We kept in mind that our position as supervisors must have made some students uncomfortable and therefore the questions we crafted were mostly open ended. We avoided academic jargons and big words, focusing solely on students thinking, feeling and processing their own experiences. Interviews and FGDs transcripts then being analysed thematically. Interview transcripts were being read over and over again by the research team until

the major themes are generated. Major themes thus being analysed thoroughly until it reveals several sub-themes. The next section elaborates the development of major themes and sub-themes in more details.

## Results

Transcripts obtained by the two round of FGD's and twelve indepth interview provided a robust data which then thematically analysed. Thematic analysis is a largely used technique in data coding and analysis which focused on themes emerged during the data collection. There are several major themes emerged during the FGD's which will be best summaries using the picture belows:

Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes of Final-Years Students' Lived Experience during Covid-19 Pandemic



The central question being addressed in this research is “how do final-years students deal with Covid-19 pandemic and how do they make sense of it through their lived-experiences?”. Reading, re-reading and contemplating reflexive interpretation were necessary following the principle of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology. While participants’ narratives or stories are being read and re-read, hermeneutic phenomenology offers researcher’s own account, lived-experience which manifested in the process of interpretation .

Two major themes were identified as central themes within the interview transcripts which are (1) challenges and (2) disappointments in regards of the way final-years



students experienced the pandemic. When being asked about “how do you deal with being in the midst of pandemic during your final year?” participants variedly suggesting “challenges”, “barriers”, “sudden change”, “big change” and “difficulties”. Thus we put together those assertions in the major theme of “challenges”.

The interview and FGDs turned an exiting turn when we started asking them about “how do you feel?”, “how’s your situation?”, “what do you missed the most?”. Participants started discussing their emotions and feeling using numerous adjectives of “sad”, “confused”, “worried” and “anxious”. Such reaction is very different from the first phase of interview when participants often reflected on behavioral change and surviving mechanism in dealing with dissertation writing in the turbulence of pandemic. Second phase of interview felt more intimate, emotional, even for interviewers, reflecting on the bitterness of pandemic realities and bleak future that awaits them as fresh graduates. Sub-themes under the major theme of “Challenge” and “Disappointments” are elaborated in details below.

### **Thesis Supervision**

Participants raised concerns during the thesis’ supervision during the work-from-home policy. Such policy forced university to conduct thesis’ supervision solely online. This means, supervisor and students arrange their own way and these too, diverse from one supervisor to another. Students identified numerous concerns from technological impairment where some supervisors are unable to use technology and meet the demand, to concerns over inadequate quality of supervision. Some supervisors prefer solely supervise through emails and minimalise online interaction and some other agreed to managed their supervision through video conference. These lead to imbalance support for students. However, participants overwhelmingly admitted that they are very much prefer offline face-to-face interaction where the message is clearer and they could talk freely to their supervisors rather than doing supervision through video conferences. The participants stated:

“It’s difficult for me to understand what my supervisor wants only through email or Whatsapp messages. There’s nothing compares to face-to-face interaction.” (EDS, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

“I feel like final-year students are the ones who have been disadvantaged by the whole pandemic compared to other students. This semester is when we need direct communication and close interaction with the supervisors the most. We have been very misfortune in that sense. How can you ask so much question about your project only through video call? It’s impossible” (HMG, 8<sup>th</sup> semester).

On the other hand, the obligation to teach, supervise, examine through video conference technology has put more burdens to university lecturers. They too voiced concerns that their day-to-day routine during the work-from-home policy had them tied to their laptops, sometimes far beyond working hours. Some lecturers which we briefly interviewed for the purpose of this research stated that managing work online has some serious consequences not only physically but also mentally. These are their statements,

“Look, we have to supervise 15 students, teach 10 classes, not to mention examine proposals and finals. How can we be expected to sit in from of the laptop, doing video conference all-day everyday? On top of that, we have to write publication as well” (AR, lecturer)

“ This is a very challenging situation for all of us. Lecturers, students, everyone. One day everthing is fine and the next day we are forced...forced to move all of our work online. It’s hard, energy draining, and exhausted. No lecturers can move their work online smoothly,” (IY, lecturer)

“ I feel like now we are expected to work more than 8 hours a day. Just because we are at home, students expect us to be available 24 hours a day. They send their work today and they want it to be returned tomorrow, ‘cause we are all at home. Ridiculous.” (AS, lecturers)

### **Home Situation**

Some students lived in cramped households where they have to share with many family members. One student have to share with 9 family members including infant nephews and nieces that made writing thesis during the day is non-existence. One other student stated that although she only has to share home with her father and a younger brother, she has to do domestic chores. Being the only female in the household made her being expected to do more domestic chores substituting the lost of her mother. Here’s the excerpts:

“ I am the only women in my family so naturally I inclined to do more chores..just like any housewives do. It’s neverending tasks” (TT, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

“ I lived with 9 family members, including my nephews and nieces. Everybody is at home. I need to be awake at night just to get to my thesis” (CP, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

“ We live in *kampong* where all of our relatives also live nearby. They don’t seem to care about government guidance of social distancing. So, almost everyday my relatives visit us freely. I couldn’t work at all during the day and have to sacrifice my sleep in order to work on my thesis” (FR, 8<sup>th</sup> semester).

### **Isolation and Loneliness**

Some students stated that the work-from-home policy isolate them from their support system, which are their friends. Friendship and peer-groups have been highlighted as loss during pandemic. One student even breach the distancing protocols to meet his friend in order to cope with work. He stated,

“ I visited my friend and three of us will work together from midday to noon on our thesis. I am a type of students who couldn’t work alone. I need to be surrounded by my friends. Otherwise I won’t finished my thesis.” (RN, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

Other students stated they meet their friends regularly on campus has been her support system throughout her study and now, it’s getting hard. She states,

“ My friends are my supporters, it’s meaningful to meet regularly with those who also through the same journey. It’s important for me. And now, it’s hard because of course Whatsaap-ing couldn’t remotely adequate the connection that you crave. You missed your friendship.”(SV, 14<sup>th</sup> semester)

“ It feels alone and lonely. You work by yourself. I missed to be amongst my friends. You can see that because you’re all through the same thing, and you can see that many people working on their final project. You lost that togetherness.”(JN, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

Other than numerous challenges stated above, students also mentioned dissappointments. “Disappointments” could be probed during the FGD interviews by asked them things about “their feelings”, “things they missed” or “could no longer expects” caused by the pandemic. Discussing things that they missed took an interesting direction because it felt more intimate, emotional and even, bittersweet. Participants expressing their “disappointments” over graduation ceremonies, library and the future that awaits them after graduation. Many answers emerged and the sub-themes are as follows.

## **Library**

Participants overwhelmingly stated university library as their 'own' space during the writing of their thesis, hence unable to work from the library is cited to be one factor of disappointments. It is also quite surprising during the interview, since lecturers often think that students rarely visited library. The word 'library' mentioned quite a lot during the discussion since this is the most place where participants work on their project before the pandemic and also thing that they missed a lot.

"I missed our library. I prefer reading actual books to downloading pdf on Internet." (HMR, 14<sup>th</sup> semester).

"I feel like our library is our safe cozy place. I'm alone but still surrounded by other people. It's quiet but also not isolating. It never occurred to me that I would ever missed the library before. But I do, now. It's not a matter of literature 'cause you can still get it on the Internet. It's just the space of calmness that I need." (NL, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

## **Graduation Ceremonies**

The biggest disappointment for final-years students in this study is unable to attend their own graduation ceremony. Graduation is often being perceived as the highlight of undergraduate students and also parents achievements. Some participants expressed their disappointments over graduation ceremony that they may never attend during this pandemic.

"When I think about it, it feels like a horror. Graduation is like...the peak of everything we've done for the last four years, it may not happened at all, just the email stating that you have passed ...this is your certificate." (MR, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

"Graduation I think, is more about the parents. It's their day after they worked so hard to put us into college. It's more important for my parents than me. I think they will be disappointed as well." (YSN, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

"I would still hope that the graduation will be proceed. I mean... it's the memory of my achievements so far." (SV, 14<sup>th</sup> semester)

"I think I made peace with that, that my cerificate will be sent in pdf formats (laugh)" (RN, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

Other than disappointments over graduation ceremony that may be organised online this year, participants also voiced concerns over future uncertainty. Pandemic has forced numerous business closures, not to mention staff reduction in many corporations. Indonesia is also no exception in this matter.

### **Future-related Uncertainties**

The majority of participants stated that they are going to apply in corporations once they graduate. Some stated they prefer state-owned corporations (BUMN) over private sectors. Small number of participants stated they want to work in media or creative industries and only one participant stated that she would pursue entrepreneurship and not slightly interested in working in corporations. However, almost all participants voiced their concerns over future uncertainties.

“I’m worried because it feels like we have been greeted by storm after storm during this pandemic. I realise that the job prospects are so bad. The news said we will face the great depression.” (AQ, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

“It worries me, of course. My cousin has graduated three years ago and she’s still looking for a job. I would like to make my mom proud ‘cause she’s the only parent I have. And I have wasted three years of my study.” (SV, 14<sup>th</sup> semester)

Two participants even want to prolong their education to have a practical qualification on the film industry (as videographer) and as a graphic designer. But even so, they are not quite sure the job prospects will be better with more qualifications.

“At least it will make me more confident because I have additional skills. And, there will always be possibilities for self-employed as well.” (NL, 8<sup>th</sup> semester)

Next section offers the reflective interpretation of these results and the way it answered the research question. The elaboration is as follows.

### **Discussion**

As being mentioned earlier, phenomenology could be best exemplified by the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. While Husserl’s approach could be described as more traditional and structured in a sense of descriptive in its nature of interpretation, Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology offers more reflexive, circular, dialogic approach as its mode of interpretation. Considering researchers’ position as University’s lecturers who also being impacted by the working policy



during Covid-19 pandemic, thus hermeneutic phenomenology is best applied in this research.

### **Surviving The Storm**

Challenges refers to things that participants had to overcome during the completion of their thesis. Covid-19 pandemic had forced universities around the world to abruptly and radically changed their academic practices. Such situation is becoming even harder, as Unesco warns, for disadvantaged students such as the disabled, lower economic backgrounds and immigrant (international) students. As said from their website, the greatest barriers in universities practices around the world is to overcome the digital divide (Unesco, 2020). Having access to technology is a privilege that not all students especially in the developing world might have.

Challenge over the online workings were quite substantial to some students, including some of our participants. While the need for literatures quite easily been provided by the Internet, students stated the challenge of doing thesis supervision online as a big challenge. Abruptly disconnected from the face-to-face interaction with the supervisors has been cited as difficult during the pandemic. The majority of students prefer face-to-face interaction rather than online interaction. This result is not surprising, since direct and interpersonal communication is an important factor for higher education students, as has been mentioned in various sources (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Kollath-Cattano et al., 2017; Huet & Casanova, 2020). Having a good interpersonal relationship with the supervisors could boost students self-efficacy and ego support to finish the last resort before the graduation. The research writing could be a daunting task for students who used to work in groups. Hence the final year (or in this case, final semester) could be challenging for some students. One student (RN), mentioned that he breached against government's advice and visited his friends since he could not work on his dissertation alone. This has been mentioned earlier in the result section which suggesting peer support is fundamental in students' well-being.

However, the radical changes in academic practice also proven to be challenging for lecturers too. Being demanded to suddenly adopt to the technology of online teaching could have detrimental effect on lecturers. Lecturers admitted they suffer from "Zoom fatigue" and "burnout" for having to stared computer laptops during the day. This has made worse by the University officials that seemingly unaware that digital divide also affect the faculty members. Older lecturers have more difficulties in managing their teaching online, let alone doing more works such as supervising and examining solely through video conference. This has resulted that the level of attention given during supervision process between each students are varied. Some students meet their supervisors online regularly, others can only send their works through emails without having direct communications. It is understandable that students have becoming more anxious about their final projects. A student use the term "surviving

the storm” to defined challenges and adversities in finishing the final year. It could have layered meanings as surviving the pandemic and also surviving the uncharted territories of academic practice.

### **Show Me The Meaning of Being Lonely**

Dissertation writing could be a long and lonely journey. Through all the years, students accustomed to work in groups, more often with their close friends. This pandemic catapulted loneliness and isolation factors into the adversity of dissertation writings. Under the normal condition, students often need more time to conduct independent research work. Under this ‘new normal’ student not only have to conduct their dissertation, including data collection, solely through online technologies, they are displaced from their familiar campus settings and bounded to work-from-home exclusively. Home situations often times offering no solution. One student lived with 9 family members, the other student lived in slump area where relatives visited regularly, another student has to do more domestic chores as she is the only female in her family after losing the mother, thus made final years more challenging than ever. Some students have to awake until dawn to find peaceful time-windows to do the writings.

Students admitted they still contacted their close friends regularly, but surely that’s not adequate in capturing the human communication process. As being mentioned in the literatures section, stress, anxiety and mental illness are profound in the student failures to complete their education (Robotham & Julian, 2006; Chapman & Orb, 2015; Frazier et al., 2018). This pandemic has made students more vulnerable and more anxious about their job opportunities after graduation. Some universities offering online counseling for students, academic members and administration staffs to cope with pandemic (see Anderson, 2020). It is quite rare in Indonesia, although some private universities began to provide such services (see Prodjo, 2020; Paramadina, 2020; Fadilla, 2020).

### **University Spaces as A Spatial Identity**

It is surprising during the interview that participants stated “library as their safe space. Towards the second phase of interview, when “how do you feel”, “how you make sense of this pandemic” and “what have you missed the most” were being asked, the conversation turned more intimate and reflective towards their feelings and awareness of their experiences. Library, for our participants, represent the familiar settings, where they usually work on their thesis in solitude but not isolated compared to working from home. University library, where students regularly visited only during their final years, offers spatial identities and commonality of what it means to be a university student. Research on spaces as providing spatial identity has been documented in several studies (Cox et al., 2012; Damayanti & Kossak, 2016; Baustien

Siuty, 2019). Spatial identity is defined as “a result of a connection between people, physical elements of places, and activities associated with them” (Damayanti & Kossak, 2016). University spaces are more than just the physicality of building in which students, staffs and faculty members spend their everyday lives, but also formative and ongoing meaning-making process where academic identity is embedded and constantly negotiated (Baustien Siuty, 2019). Furthermore, Siuty asserted that the meaning making process is complex and ever-changing following the way spaces have been ‘experienced’ to sustain academic processes (p. 706). Library spaces offering a sense of comfort and belonging, where the identity of being a university student lies within the participants. Such a sense of belonging that has now deeply missed, regretted and displaced by the turmoil of never ending pandemic conundrum.

## **Conclusion**

This research is driven to address the question of “how do final-years students deal with the pandemic and how do they make sense of it through their lived-experiences?”. In order to answer the question, hermeneutic phenomenology derived from the work of Martin Heidegger is utilised. Within the lengthy elaboration of result finding and discussion, it is revealed that pandemic does heavily impacted the work of final research project for the final-year students. Challenges are identified through numerous factors such as the communication barriers with the supervisors, unsupportive home situations and a sense of loneliness and isolation. This research also explored the way in which a sense of disappointment lies within the displacement of living events such as the loss of spatial identity to the missed chance of having graduation ceremonies. Covid-19 pandemic is a spiralled conundrum wherein the bodily and physical health often times eclipse the mental-psychological dimensions. This research is shown that the lasting effect of the pandemic stretches beyond discourses of public health. The social dimension of the everyday living experiences of the common people should be taken into consideration for policy makers, including University boards when formulating the future policy of higher-education institutions.

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