

Online Method as an Emergency Solution for Student's Community Engagement Programs during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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Abstract—There have been many studies related to Student's Community Engagement (KKN) program during the COVID-19 pandemic, but no one has analysed it based on the student's experience. So, this study aims to explore the student experiences in implementing online KKN program during the pandemic. This study used qualitative methods and data collection carried out through observation, in-depth interviews, and literature studies. The results showed that as an emergency solution from the university, students as the core of online KKN are trying to adapt with the situation and the latest regulation during the pandemic. Then, because the activities are carried out from home and far from the KKN location, the internet becomes the main access to stay connected. Several lessons learned from the online KKN student's experiences are: first, students are able to accept rapid changes in their life realities which are sometimes not in accordance with their ideals that have been planned. Second, in the new normal era, students still have to participate in empowering rural communities according to their capacity. Third, students have the opportunity to optimize their skills and information technology that has been obtained during lectures to be practiced in social life.

Keywords— COVID-19, Internet, Online KKN, Rapid Change, Student Experiences

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the Indonesian Government announced the first positive confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 2, 2020, no one knows when the pandemic will end. Although the accelerated vaccination program continues, various sectors of people's lives have been disrupted, including in the education sector. Starting March 15, 2020, the Government has implemented work from home, which was followed by the Large-Scale Social Restrictions (Bahasa Indonesia: *Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar – PSBB*) policy. The government asks the Indonesian people to reduce activities outside their home as an effort to reduce the spread of COVID-19. All educational level institutions are expected to be able to adapt with the rapidly changing pandemic situation, while the teaching and learning activities can still be carried out from home [1].

According to the Circular Letter of the Director General of Higher Education of the Republic of Indonesia Number 1 of 2020 about the Prevention of the Spread of COVID-19 in the Higher Education Institution, start on March 16, 2020 the *Tri Dharma* activities ranging from teaching and learning; research; and community engagement are carried out from home. With limited time and preparation process; students, lecturers, and even policy makers are also pressured by this condition. In its realization, the implementation of *Tri Dharma* activities is forced not to be carried out face-to-face (offline-based learning), but to be replaced with online-based learning both synchronously and asynchronously. Online-based learning is considered as an alternative win-win solution in order to reduce direct meetings between the academic community (especially lecturers and students) and reduce crowds.

In responding to the implementation of online-based learning and work from home policy, the majority of students from outside the region chose to return to their hometowns so they could reunite with their families. However, a small number of other students choose to stay in their boarding house/dormitory because they believe that distance learning will only be applied for a few weeks or months. Over time, they also began to adapt with the online teaching and learning method, although at the beginning of its implementation, both in terms of teaching methodology and mastery of technology, it was still very rigid because this method was the first time applied and without prior preparation. Utilization of virtual meeting platforms – Zoom, Google Meet, WebEx, etc. – and social media platforms – WhatsApp, LINE, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – become a means of connecting teaching and learning activities between lecturers and students.

Although it must be admitted, there are several obstacles that must be faced during online teaching and learning activities such as: unstable internet connections, limited internet quotas, and sometimes sudden power outages. The activities are hampered because of student residences scattered throughout various rural and urban areas. This condition is proof that behind the outbreak of COVID-19, our education has been disrupted where the digitalization of education is implemented while in terms of resources – human, infrastructure, and information technology – we are not fully ready for this change, so it has an impact on the satisfaction of online teaching and learning [2].

Other student activities that are also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are Student's Community Engagement program (Bahasa Indonesia: *Kuliah Kerja Nyata* – KKN). Before the pandemic, KKN was one of the most awaited activities by almost all students. KKN are identical to activities where students can live together with the local community during the KKN period. They will join with other interdisciplinary students to be able to practice with the local community. Unfortunately, since the pandemic, KKN activities to directly interact with the local community are very unlikely to be carried out. In addition, many students are still in their hometowns, and it is not possible to carry out their mobility between regions because of the tight security at the regional entrance gates from one area to another and social restrictions.

Considering the increase in positive cases of COVID-19 from day to day, the Directorate General of Higher Education together with universities finally carried out KKN activities from home with the online method as an emergency solution. Each university then made adjustments by changing the implementation of offline KKN to online KKN. Each university can prepare the guidelines and technical instructions for online KKN activities which will later be carried out by each student who takes this course according to the policies of their respective universities. The university prioritizes the health and safety aspects of all parties involved in it. In addition, the university also considers the location where most of the location is still in the yellow, orange, and red zones.

Various considerations of the new regulations in implementing online KKN also became the main discussion for prospective students. Especially when the decision to implement online KKN has been determined by the university. Students as the subject of KKN activities began to hesitate whether to choose online during a pandemic or postpone it to the next semester. Online KKN is something new and they have never imagined before how to carry out community engagement activities from home without going into the community. This condition is mostly experienced by students at the beginning of the emergence of the term online KKN.

In this paper, the author specifically wants to explore the student experiences who have carried out online KKN during the pandemic in Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). A distinctive feature of the KKN nomenclature at UGM is the addition of the term Community Empowerment Learning (Bahasa Indonesia: *Pembelajaran Pemberdayaan Masyarakat* – PPM), so it is commonly called KKN-PPM. KKN-PPM is implemented the concept interactively and synergistically between students and the community in development through activities that may involve, engage, and foster a sense of belonging to the community development [3].

The author focuses on the online KKN-PPM UGM 2nd Period of 2020 and 2nd Period of 2021 with several main considerations. *First*, historically, since 1951 until before the pandemic, the KKN activities have been carried out by direct involvement with the local community. Meanwhile, during pandemic, the online KKN is carried out entirely

from home by utilizing information and communication technology. *Second*, KKN is one of the university's compulsory subjects with three credits which is carried out off campus for fifty days so students from various disciplines can collaborate in academic-theoretical activities with empirical-practical activities. The new regulation for implementing online KKN is also based on the high number of COVID-19, the implementation of mobility restrictions, and the duration of student time.

Third, KKN is carried out in groups or teams. One team consists of a maximum of thirty students from four clusters – science and technology; agro; social humanities; and medical – with locations that have been agreed upon between the Directorate of Community Services (Bahasa Indonesia: *Direktorat Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat – DPkM*) UGM, students, and local government agencies. Students who are members of a team become the core implementing activities that aim to empower the community and help provide solutions to problems faced by the community at the KKN location as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourth, the online KKN is an example of the realization of the 'Free Campus Independent Learning' Policy as conveyed by the Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia who was present virtually at the KKN deployment ceremony for 2nd Period of 2020 which provided opportunities for students to hone hard skills and soft skills in their activities [4]. With these several considerations, this paper aims to explore the student experiences in implementing online KKN program during the pandemic.

Every university has a different concept of KKN implementation [5]. So, in this part, the author gives some previous studies about the different concepts of KKN implementation during the pandemic situation. It can be seen from the programs and methods by various universities during the last two years (2020-2021) as follows. *First*, Estriyanto explained about the implementation of offline KKN conducted by Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) students who live in their home areas in Tegal and Purbalingga Regencies from May to June 2020 during the pandemic [6]. Students are free to try and to solve various problems in the village where they live which is used as a KKN location. They can help educate the public and provide reinforcement in dealing with the impact of COVID-19.

Second, Miftah and others explained about the Thematic KKN for COVID-19 Prevention in Cibatuh Village, Garut Regency which was carried out by KKN students from the Garut Regency Technological College with educational activities to prevent COVID-19 and manufacture personal protective equipment such as of masks, cloth, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant online for 31 days from August 1 to August 31, 2020 [7]. *Third*, Putra and Yuhari explained about the online KKN for students at the Indonesian Art Institute of Denpasar which was conducted in Carangsari Village, Badung Regency which the area of residence or village of origin of each KKN participant is carried out by educating elementary school age children about the importance of following health rules and living a healthy and clean life in tackling COVID-19 [8].

Fourth, Heydemans and others which explains about the implementation of the Manado State Christian Institute. Thematic KKN which focuses on socialization and 5M education activities to the community run by KKN students with hybrid methods (online and offline) in February to March 2021 according to the student's area of origin and close to the student's house [9]. *Fifth*, Janati and others explained about the online KKN activities of the Muhammadiyah University of Jakarta focusing on promotional counselling related to eye health for students of SMPIT Darul Abidin which was held from July 1 to August 1, 2021. From the results of this study, there are various forms of implementation of KKN, ranging from offline, online, and hybrid [10].

Most of them focus on KKN program activities which are directed at providing education and outreach to the public regarding the methods of prevention and handling of COVID-19; and provide education to the local community about several activities that can be done at home so that they can remain productive during the implementation of work from home and social distancing policies. Based on those several previous studies, none of the research results have in-depth reviewed the student's experiences when implementing the online KKN program. To fill the gaps, this study tries to explore the student experiences in implementing online activities and several lessons learned.

II. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach. To obtain comprehensive research data, the author uses in-depth interviews, literature study, and observation. Steinar Kvale in his book 'Doing Interviews' mentioned that the interview is a powerful method of producing knowledge of the human situation, as well as for exploring the ways in which subjects experience and understand their own words to describe their activities, experiences, and opinions [11]. In the context of this research, the author conducted a semi-structured interview with selected informants who joined KKN-PPM UGM with a focus on key informants as follows: (1) representatives of team members of KKN-PPM UGM Ibun Unit (JB036) 2nd Period of 2020 which was held from June 29 to August 18, 2020 in Ibun District, Bandung Regency, West Java Province; (2) representatives of team members of KKN-PPM UGM Sekotong Unit (NB001) 2nd Period of 2021 which was held from July 5 to August 23, 2021 in Sekotong District, West Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province. The realization of all activities is carried out online and without being sent to KKN locations.

In addition, this research is also supported by secondary data obtained through newspapers, journals, books, and government websites that can be freely accessed by the public. The author also uses several main keywords when tracing relevant online literature, such as: Online KKN, community empowerment, community engagement, COVID-19, and pandemic. Moreover, the author was also directly involved in the online KKN during that period as a field supervisor starting from the preparation of the proposal until the end of the KKN activities in that period. All the obstacles and student achievements during online KKN are always discussed together in bi-weekly meetings which are also conducted online in order to know the working process of the members of the KKN team.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the DPKM UGM issued Decree Number 481/UN1/DPM/KKN/KKN/PM/2020 about the Notification of the Implementation of KKN-PPM UGM 2nd Period of 2020, so all activities plan carried out by the team of Ibun Unit (JB036) and other teams underwent a drastic change from what was planned – from offline to online. When students found out about this new regulation, the majority of students were shocked and not ready to accept the changes that were so fast. Online KKN is something most students don't expect [12]. They have no other choice and have no imagination of how the implementation of online KKN is carried out because what they have prepared is offline KKN, going directly to KKN location and interacting with the community as has been implemented by other KKN participants in 2019. They have received many stories and experiences from previous student participants. Starting from the proposal preparation process, departure preparation, sponsorship fundraising, KKN deployment ceremonies, realization of activities, to reporting on KKN activities, each has a very interesting story to tell based on their own previous experiences.

The direct discussion becomes a strategic means to finalize the KKN program to be implemented and how to involve the local hamlet/village community in its empowerment. This interaction also forms a reciprocal relationship between the parties involved in it. Students can practice the knowledge gained during lectures by exploring what problem solving is actually needed by the community when they are at the KKN location. On the other hand, students can also learn from the local community about the values of life and how the local community solves the problems they face together with their local wisdom and social capital. More than that, students can also explore other potentials that may not have been included in the work program, while enjoying the natural beauty of the local location with team members and the local community. Living in a village full of beauty and away from the hustle and bustle of a big city is certainly a dream for them.

The student participants in online KKN cannot realize their dreams, interactions, and more real off-campus learning experiences. The responses of prospective KKN students who will be participating in online KKN are also very diverse because a few months earlier in 2019 until before the pandemic, they had formed a proposing team and prepared a proposal with their field supervisor for the face-to-face KKN program design. The rapid change in regulation during this pandemic, makes some students feel disappointed, sad, and have to think again about how to design online KKN with the limited time, especially as a KKN team, most of whom have never met before. They just met in a virtual

room because they are part of a team. In addition, regardless of the KKN location, whether far or near, it will be the same, because everything is carried out by online activities.

The pros and cons of implementing online KKN have become a hot discussion among prospective KKN students. Some feel panicked, disappointed, angry, and some are even happy if KKN is done online. For students who are pros with online KKN, they try to leave their ideals and move forward to face the existing reality. Meanwhile, those who were cons, decided not to choose to carry out online KKN. They believe that maybe in the next KKN period, the conditions will return to normal and they can return to serving directly in the community. This policy is indeed a very dilemmatic choice for every final year student to decide.

Empowering local communities became a big challenge for KKN students during the pandemic because the implementation of KKN is not only for fulfilling the credits but also being a form of social responsibility. In addition, as the lyrics of the Mars KKN-PPM UGM, which is always sung at the KKN launch ceremony, contain a lot of promise as a student. The lyrics of KKN song emphasize a student's promise to be ready to carry out tasks in the *Tri Dharma*, to serve the country, to be ready to serve the community and village development for the homeland and nation. The call of the soul to carry out KKN during a pandemic will certainly be very different from before the pandemic. In this difficult time, now is the right time for UGM students to keep moving forward from any impossible situation and take part in continuing to contribute to the country. Although the way to contribute is very limited because for fifty days, students as the core of online KKN are trying to adapt with the situation and virtual activities.

The implementation of online KKN in 2020 is actually not entirely difficult because previously they had started to be trained with online teaching and learning which were conducted approximately three months earlier. But the main difference between online KKN and online teaching and learning is the scope of interaction. In the online teaching and learning process, the main interaction lies with the lecturers and students; while in the online KKN process, the interactions are very diverse, starting from team members, field supervisor, local government in all level, local communities, and other stakeholders. The interactions are more complex because students are also trying to establish cooperation with relevant stakeholders who are completely new to them by relying on responses and coordination from government officers, community leaders, and also local communities. Moreover, the student also tries to build the new network and communication so the plan and the implementation of each program activities can run smoothly. Unfortunately, because the KKN locations are in remote areas, they have limited access and internet networks to stay connected with each stakeholder.

Based on the student experiences, they mentioned that there are many challenges that must be faced and sometimes make students feel dissatisfied with the implementation of online KKN because the hope to help rural communities has not been fully implemented [13]. Similar conditions were also experienced by other KKN teams who also felt that there was no reciprocal effect of the program that could be felt by the community, because the programs carried out were also not responded to by the local community. For doing fifty days with online KKN, there are many ups and downs that must be passed so that the KKN program can be implemented. Moreover, at the time of implementation, many stakeholders from the location actually wanted and requested the direct presence of students so that the empowerment program could run effectively. The reason is, the majority of village communities are not familiar with using digital platforms, not all of them have smartphones or computers, and not all of them have internet quotas to carry out the online empowerment activities. So, the villagers felt it was difficult to participate in online activities.

For this reason, students are rethinking how to make the benefits of the online KKN program – in the form of education, training, and socialization – also felt by those who are the target audience. In the end, the KKN team sent community empowerment products to the locations so that later they could be distributed to the local community through village/sub-district officials. The product outputs are very diverse, for example: booklets, caricature books, video tutorials, education books, worship equipment, etc. The output of this activity can at least contribute to responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this pandemic, students still tried to run the empowerment program as much as they could from home, because until the end of the KKN the pandemic conditions had not gradually improved and still enforced physical distancing with strict health protocols.

Entering 2021, everyone hopes that the pandemic will end soon because the Government has imported vaccines. The government continues to intensify the vaccination distribution program in order to be able to increase the immunity of the community so people can do activities in public spaces even though it is still a very limited number from the normal situation it should be. In the preparation process, the DPkM UGM has also begun and socialize the design of hybrid (mixed offline-online) and online KKN to prospective student participants. However, it should be noted that the DPkM's decision may change at any time according to the development of the pandemic situation. Besides that, this situation cannot be separated from the extension of the Enforcement of Emergency Community Activity Restrictions Policy accompanied by judicial operations, where violators of the health protocol will be given sanctions [14].

All preparations are still vacillating because the method for implementing KKN will be determined later depending on the last situation and the update number of COVID-19. Unfortunately, until a few days before the date of implementation, the plan was rapidly changing, the hybrid KKN methods were cancelled. The hybrid method is not possible to implement due to the high spread of the delta variant of COVID-19 cases. As conveyed by the Director of DPkM UGM, the implementation of KKN was fully carried out with online method, it will be the same as the previous year. Of course, this situation also received various reactions from students who had prepared hybrid methods. With the limited days for preparation, the students have to accept the fact that online KKN is what they have to do in the future.

This is reinforced by the Circular Letter Number 4096/UN1.PIII/DIT-PKM/PM/2021 about the Implementation of KKN-PPM UGM 2nd Period of 2021 dated June 29, 2021 where it is stated that: *First*, the implementation of KKN-PPM UGM 2nd Period is held online for all units without exception. *Second*, DPkM coordinates with relevant parties in order to adjust the methods needed so that the activity can run well. When reading the contents of the letter, the KKN team who had planned the hybrid methods felt the most restless because they had done a lot of preparation starting from buying flight tickets, buying goods for the needs of the program, and paying for this and that. But in the end, the money that has been spent is wasted because it is not utilized at all. It cannot be denied that the latest regulation still leaves disappointment, and they try to accept the situation. They can continue to carry out community engagement activities from home and interact with team members, field supervisor, and government officers and the local community using various digital platforms that have been mutually agreed upon even though they are not physically together.

Based on the student's experience in the team of Sekotong Unit (NB001), they stated that this period is the second year of online KKN implementation in Sekotong District, so the local government already understands how the technical implementation of online method is. Of course, this condition is very beneficial for both parties, both for students and the local government. The local government strongly supports the online KKN and expects that the program will run smoothly because the location has been used since the previous year. But during the implementation of online KKN for fifty days, there are several obstacles faced by students as follows: *First*, there was no response from the local communities whether to accept or reject the implementation of online KKN so the students with field supervisor then conveyed to the local district government to discuss and find the solution to overcome the problem. *Second*, there is instability of the internet network because the location of the village is in a remote area. Moreover, some of the local communities don't have internet quotas and no free Wi-Fi area to access internet so they can't join in the virtual meetings. *Third*, most of the local communities do not have smartphones or computers, so they also cannot access certain applications taught by students. The several number of existing obstacles and limitations did not dampen the intention of students. They try to run a program of activities that are coordinated with the village government and the sub-district government as community representatives. This limitation is indeed a concern for students because they are aware from the beginning that their location has limitations for implementing online KKN.

However, they do not make the obstacles as a burden. They are constantly trying to hone their skills. As stated by Ganjar Pranowo – Governor of Central Java Province and Chair of UGM Alumni Family – at the KKN deployment ceremony for this period, he said that in the village assistance process, students can carry out various processes.

Pranowo also emphasized that the UGM student is creative and innovative, so they will find a way to solve the problems and help the local community with the empowering process [15]. For 50 days, various empowered outcomes were produced. The resulting output products are then also sent to village and sub-district representatives so after the activities of online KKN was finished, the local community can feel the benefits of the empowerment activities and hopefully it can continue independently by the local community.

Based on the student's experience in running 2020 and 2021 online KKN activities, this is a reflective note for the next period in order to improve the quality of KKN. All parties who are involved in KKN activities are expected to be able to adapt with the situation and the new method for doing community engagement. Students who are the core of implementing KKN activities are also expected to be more creative and innovative in mapping community problems during the pandemic and looking for alternative solutions to solve the problem. Although it is well recognized and understood, the implementation of online KKN is becoming more difficult than offline KKN.

For this reason, several lessons learned that can be drawn from the two-year example of implementing online KKN from home as follows. *First*, students are able to accept rapid changes in the life realities which are sometimes not in accordance with the ideals that have been planned. During this pandemic, students must also understand how to coexist with the COVID-19 virus and maintain health protocols; but on the other hand, they also have to complete KKN because it is related to the study period. *Second*, in the new normal, students still have to participate in empowering rural communities according to their capacity. It's better to do something useful no matter how small or big rather than nothing to do at all. Third, the opportunity to optimize skills and use information technology that has been obtained during lectures can be practiced in social life. This also needs to be supported by equal distribution of internet access throughout Indonesia so that the implementation of online KKN can be carried out properly.

Departing from this online KKN and student's experience, it can be a valuable lesson especially for students to contribute to increase public awareness, maintain health protocols, and increase students' sensitivity towards social problems. Even though the duration of the online KKN has ended, the sustainability of the community empowerment program can be continued by the local community. It will be a great lesson to be learned from the past experiences and what we can do for now and for the future during the pandemic.

IV. CONCLUSION

Community engagement activities carried out by KKN students are being tested by the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. As an emergency solution, the reality of the implementation of KKN has also been changed to online since 2020 and continued in 2021. A previously unpredictable condition has disrupted the implementation of KKN activities and must be faced together in the midst of very limited time preparation. The use of information technology in online KKN is carried out massively as a rational choice for students to become problem solvers, motivators, as well as innovators by helping and finding solutions to social problems due to the impact of COVID-19. Students are faced with a crisis situation and the limited exchange of information and communication that relies on the response of related stakeholders and the internet network in the implementation of online KKN activities. Students are not only required to be able to adapt with the current situation, but students as a peer learning are also expected to be able to make various breakthroughs in dealing with existing changes, participate in society even from their home, as well as improve their social skills and cooperation with all relevant stakeholders involved.

This paper has limitations such as: *first*, with the limited time and distance, as well as the social restriction policy was still in effect, so in collecting the data the author also uses online in-depth interview. *Second*, this research only focusses on KKN-PPM UGM Ibun Unit (JB036) and Sekotong Unit (NB001) to explore the student experiences. So, for the further studies the author should consider exploring the other teams or other university because every university has different method to implement KKN during the COVID-19 pandemic and will lead to different student experiences.

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