

# HIGHER ED

## Staying motivated with online learning



The feeling of loneliness or isolation may set in as students tackle new topics and assignments without the support that they are accustomed to. PIC FROM UNSPLASH.COM

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**S**TAYING focused and motivated are the two main challenges university students are experiencing ever since they had to switch from face-to-face learning to the virtual and remote method due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

While some have adapted well to this new norm, many are still grappling with technical issues, as well as the solitude and isolation, while trying their best to keep on track with their studies.

The feeling of loneliness or isolation may also set in as students tackle new topics and assignments without the support they are accustomed to, particularly the physical and immediate communications with lecturers and peers.

With the Higher Education Ministry deciding that online teaching and learning in tertiary education would continue until Dec 31, their concerns are even more accentuated.

For third-year Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) chemical engineering student Muhamad Rithaudin Rosman, 22, the persistent problem for someone living in the rural area is stable and strong Internet connection.

This makes getting clear explanations from lecturers through video calls difficult, said the student who lives in the outskirts of Kota Tinggi in Johor. While he always tries to find other alternatives, like referring to textbooks and notes, it is not the same.

"The situation can be quite disheartening and can affect focus and concentration, especially when carrying out self-directed tasks and projects. But I try to stay positive and make the best of the situation," he said.



Muhamad Rithaudin Rosman



Nur Syazwina Md Azaham

Having the self-discipline to keep to lecture or class schedule is what university mate Nur Syazwina Md Azaham, 22, struggles with.

The law student, who is in her third year, misses the company of friends and classmates, who were her constant motivators to keep on track when on campus.

"Online discussions don't really give me the same degree of understanding as in real life, which then makes me feel down. I also don't have some of my books, causing me to flounder a bit as I personally prefer to read them and highlight the important notes," she said.

However, she appreciates the fact her lecturers do take the time to ask for feedback on how to improve classes.

"Having understanding and compassionate lecturers goes a long way in helping students be more determined to do our best despite our struggles learning online."

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) third-year agribusiness student Fatin Mohd Farid Rozaidi, 22, keeps her focus during online classes by writing notes based on the presentations by lecturers and classmates.

"There is no daily routine as some of my classes are conducted by giving assignments and daily homework as a majority of my classmates have poor Internet connection. But it would be much more interesting if lecturers use games instead of just viewing and listening to presentations," she said.

The urge to do something other than study is always there, said David Chooi Xian Loong, a 21-year-old Diploma of English Language

Teaching student at UCSI College.

"I love cooking, watching movies, playing with my pets. But, somehow, I get the job done because of a promise I made to myself that I will do whatever it takes to provide for my

family and my loved ones," he said.

"If I feel lost in my studies, I try my best to engage a friend in a video call to discuss the topic or assignment. After all, two brains are better than one."

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) psychology officer Nur Farhana Sulaiman said when physical class cannot be implemented, there would be some elements that cannot be controlled by the lecturers or tutors, like students' attendance, participation and attention.

"Students must be responsible for themselves. At this point in time, we all must adapt to the new norm and for students that means not relying on a 'teacher' who will direct them on what to do and what to prepare for next. If they focus and stay motivated, they will be successful. It all depends on 'me, myself and I'," she said.

Nur Farhana said students can choose to live life in positive vibes or dwell in the negative.

"The option is in our hands not others. If we want to succeed, then we must take it on ourselves to make it happen," she said.

"Students must be more disciplined, resolve their technical issues and create the mood to enhance the motivational level. Make a proper schedule just like when attending normal face-to-face classes.

It may be putting a little bit of effort to dress for class to get into the mood. You know yourselves better and what works for you to stay focused and motivated."

UPM psychology officer Siti Fatimah Abdul Ghani advises students to not overthink the situation and handle the issue at hand in a practical manner.

Siti Fatimah said motivation often dips when students fail to find a purpose in what they are doing. This is followed by anxiety caused by what is actually happening and also what may happen in the future due to the current situation. Then comes boredom and distractions.

"When we look at major changes, a period of adaptation and transition is needed. This takes time and comes in phases, and this applies to e-learning too," she said.

"On top of that, there are some cases where students lack the devices and Internet access to be able to participate in online classes. This leaves many students in a bad spot where they are unable to receive an education."

She suggests students look into ways to find some motivation if they feel down or confused.

"Find the same drive and purpose you've always had inside you, even if classes/university doesn't feel as important right now. Why are you at university? What are your goals?"

"Set daily goals by having a to-do list to give some direction. Pair your work with something fun and interesting like setting up your workspace in a special theme or plan a reward for yourself after completing a task.

"Build study habits that set yourself to autopilot to make it easier to say no to temptations and get tasks done. But remember to take a break to reduce feelings of fatigue."

Planning ahead and setting goals is now both possible and necessary, said Siti Fatimah.

"Being optimistic about the future and having things to look forward to can also help reduce anxiety and reduce fatigue."

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SITI FATIMAH ABDUL GHANI

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) psychology officer