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THIS year marks the first time in the country's education history that Malaysian public universities have had to conduct their semester final exams for their entire student population virtually.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic that nearly crippled the world and the country's movement control order (MCO) that resulted in strict social distancing measures, universities had to find alternative ways to conduct their exams.

The written exams, usually held in rooms across campuses, are now done on a computer using both online and offline methods.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International Affairs) Prof Datuk Dr Mohd Marzuki Mustafa said final exams for its almost 3,900 students were fully held online and it was an open book exam for the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year.

He said the exams in the Bangi and Kuala Lumpur campuses were held for two weeks beginning June 29 while the Medical Faculty began theirs five days earlier.

"The exam process was conducted following the same procedure as the previous offline exam, starting with the vetting of the final exam questions until the exam questions were transferred into the UKMFolio system."

UKMFolio, he explained, is the university's learning management system. The entire teaching and learning process for the second half of the semester was conducted on the platform.

"Since it was the first time an online exam took place, UKM Curriculum Teaching and Development Centre organised two open webinar series for all UKM lecturers and students, on

Exams in the new norm

Malaysia's IPTAs have shown that reliable assessments are possible even when conducted wholly online.

"We identified students who had no Internet access and developed special mechanisms to facilitate their learning and assessment."

Prof Ahmad Farhan



"The examination process was conducted in the same procedure as the previous offline exam."

Prof Mohd Marzuki



"One of the challenges we faced was the student's Internet connectivity."

Prof M. Iqbal



top of having clinics. Frequently Asked Questions (lists) and videos to assist the lecturers and students with the quiz features in UKMFolio," said Prof Mohd Marzuki.

Topics touched on in the webinars included how to test Internet speed, how to cope with family interruptions during an exam, and how to do the open book exams.

"For example, we gave advice on using minimum reference books, using coloured stickers to mark important notes or definitions, and preparing all devices and technical facilities," he added.

The lecturers and students were also exposed to the way the quiz-

zes and exams would be presented in the interface so that they became familiar with the icons used in the "exam paper" and the entire exam process in UKMFolio.

For students who had weak Internet connectivity, UKM had a contingency plan for them.

"For courses that had already been identified with students possessing weak or no Internet connection, lecturers prepared an open online exam that lasted for 24 hours, the longest duration allowed."

"Thus students were able to use their mobiles to access the exam questions online via the UKMFolio app and email their answers

before the cut-off time."

Besides having the online exam, Prof Mohd Marzuki said lecturers could opt to carry out continuous assessments.

"Students do not sit for a final exam at a specified time and date but they have projects, assignments, case studies and a few online tests that carry a heavy weightage equivalent to a final exam," he added.

Over in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), the students sat for a mixed-mode "final assessment".

Their deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International) Prof Dr M. Iqbal Saripan said this involved both online and offline assessments.

He said that for this semester, the usual final exams were replaced with assessments such as assignments, open book exams, online quizzes, reports and creating portfolios.

"UPM follows the advisory guideline by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), which sets 70% of coursework as assessment and 30% as final assessment," he added.

Prof M. Iqbal said one of the challenges the students faced was Internet connectivity. To overcome this, he said the assessment mode used was determined based on a student's Internet bandwidth.

"If students are in a location with low bandwidth, lecturers are allowed to perform assessments using appropriate external applications (other than PutraBLAST - UPM's official learning management system) such as Google Forms, WhatsApp, Telegram or email," he added.

For the academic staff, he said they were given intensive training through a series of webinars, as well as a guidebook on conducting the final assessments virtually.

"The final exam questions are moderated following our ISO-compliant UPM procedures, but we allow some flexibility in terms of the duration and method of final exam invigilating."

"It depends on the situation," he added.

"Conducting assessments online is the most practical practice during the pandemic and possible with the advances in digital technology today," he said.

The final assessment for this semester will continue until Aug 9 but Prof M. Iqbal said as long as the pandemic is not completely over, it will continue to be done

virtually.

Up north in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), acting deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International) Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Farhan Mohd Sadullah said the research university had changed the components of their assessment to low-stake assessment types, which means the exam component had been made very minimal.

"This was facilitated by the MQA and all professional bodies, who allowed this, as long as we ensure that all learning outcomes are met," he added.

"We coached our lecturers with the art (of going online), the know-how and the principles of online teaching and learning," he said, adding that this was done through webinars and YouTube videos.

He also said they encouraged low bandwidth teaching and learning to allow students to learn both synchronously and asynchronously.

"This helped our students with poor access to the Internet."

Prof Ahmad Farhan said: "We empowered the faculties and their members to address this, and that gave a personal, empathetic touch to the whole process."

"Assessment is very important and is part of ensuring the learning outcomes of students are met."

"Having said that, assessment is not only through exams. In fact, you will get more opportunities to achieve the various learning outcomes through more assessment types other than through exams," he said.

He added that the university has been trying to reduce the exam component in their courses for many years but has generally been met with resistance towards their efforts.

"So, when Covid-19 struck us and we had to go online, that was also used as an opportunity to make the right strike."

Universiti Malaysia (UM) deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International) Prof Dr Kamila Ghazali said they are confident they can continue conducting online exams in the future, even after the pandemic is over.

"Having said that, we still need to ensure that we identify gaps for the purpose of continuous improvement."

"Currently, UM is in the midst of collecting data so we can do the analysis for a thorough post-mortem of the conduct of eLearning and online exams," she added.

"Preparing for exams at home was not easy. There were so many distractions with my family around. We had to enter a Zoom meeting when the exam started so the lecturer could watch us while we answered the papers. That's for the online exams. We also had papers conducted offline that we downloaded from the student portal. This had, on average, two days to be submitted. We had open book exams and I think this is an advantage as it is easier to score. So, maybe my grades will improve this semester."

Muhammad Fahmi Saleh, 20, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Bachelor of Science in Human Development with Management

"Our exams were moved online but most classes replaced the traditional, long written exam with extra quizzes and coursework. I did everything at home but it was stressful as we had to self-study. It was also harder with limited interaction with our lecturers. I feel like having our exams virtually is fine. It's better than sitting in exam halls because we have the comfort of doing our work where we like."

Lalitha Samiappan, 21, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Bachelor of Science (Data Science) with Honours

"I prefer doing the final exams offline rather than online because my surroundings are noisy and my Wi-Fi connection is dependent on the weather. The Internet becomes slow when it rains and I'm scared I'll have problems submitting my answers. It's been tough studying alone at home. Normally, I can just go to my friends' room and discuss topics but now, we're all living far apart. It's hard. For the exams, we had to log in to the student portal and fill in a Google Form that includes signing an honour pledge that says we won't cheat."

Nurul Fariesya Suhaila Md Sazihan, 21, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Bachelor of Computer and Communication Systems Engineering

Student experience

