

Overcoming adversity in higher education during pandemic

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

EDUCATION is a dynamic process encompassing elements of learning, unlearning and relearning. These processes are highly inclusive, with both teacher and student continuously interacting and adapting to the academic environment surrounding them.

Perhaps, this synergy was most profoundly tested in the past few months, as higher education institutions culminate the anniversary of teaching predominantly via online platforms.

Those who were adept to adapt managed information delivery succinctly, while those late onto the bandwagon found themselves struggling to cope throughout the semesters.

Predictably, there are voices within the academic fraternity calling for a reprieve to this notion. Some urged for a return to face-to-face teaching and learning, while others deliberated for a more flexible, hybrid-oriented pedagogy; by minimising physical interaction only to a subset of the undergraduate student population.

Educators lament that effective teaching and learning can only occur if content delivery is proficient, and an online conduct of teaching may regress this process.

However, as the pandemic persists and Covid-19 cases tread an increasing trend, we are again confronted with the reality of conducting classes online.

Learning from experience, the possibility of inoculating the nation with another widespread, pervasive cluster originating from an exodus of students into universities is a very possible scenario from this exercise.

Fully opening the faculty doors without careful mitigation of the risks associated with the pandemic means exposing hundreds of thousands of students to the virus.

Considering that undergraduates are often younger adults, they may present as asymptomatic, but can volatily spread the virus within a community, effortlessly increasing the prevalence of cases within a district or state.

A case study for this can be traced to a news report earlier in January, where a majority of students returning to university from their hometowns were diagnosed as Covid-19 positive. While they have been preemptively quarantined through

tight standard operating procedures, this serves as evidence that a larger influx of student population may not necessarily be easier to manage and would potentially lead to more infection cases being reported.

Nonetheless, this outlook is not without a glimmer of hope. As better regulations are implied by administrators and aptly observed by the public, hopefully, the number of positive Covid-19 cases will dwindle and current restrictions can be relaxed.

Nonetheless, before this becomes a reality, the conduct of teaching and learning via online platforms may very well still be the new norm this year.

On a positive note, educators are entering 2021 with experience from the preceding year. Students are now getting used to receiving information via Zoom or Google Hangout sessions, and the online learning management systems adopted by universities are now fully utilised by the academic ecosystem.

More and more quality, validated content is being shared and uploaded onto social media platforms by our academics and experts.

This will not only benefit university students, but also the

online community which would serendipitously put the nation on the global scene.

We also finally realise that a laptop or desktop computer can do much more than a means of consuming content, typing documents, or preparing slides — but also to produce original and accurate content by leveraging a myriad of tools and applications.

From my personal experience, the online conduct of lectures and assignments has enabled me to learn new skills in teaching.

My students applauded my decision of sharing recorded lectures online, as they are now able to digest the information at their own pace and time repeatedly.

Feedback from lectures also occurs asynchronously compared to real time in conventional lectures, so both I and my students have more time to convey both query and information.

We communicated and connected more, exchanging not only educational information, but also the occasional social banter on messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Such similar connections would otherwise be minimal, or almost non-existent in the past.

Some sacrifice in terms of

hands-on learning, however, may have been incurred from the absence of practical classes, but this forces us to find creative ways of providing a similar experience via alternative, albeit suboptimal means.

As the current semester draws to a close and a new one beckons, we are still grateful that knowledge transfer can still occur in such challenging times.

As Malaysia moves into another year in this age of the pandemic, higher education institutions relearn skills of embracing strength in adversity.

In these uncertain times, we should always hope for the best, but nonetheless make providence for the unprecedented.

Safety should always be prioritised over convenience, and hopefully, with dedicated teachers and passionate students, we shall mature from it with tenacity and resilience.

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The views expressed are of the writer and do not necessarily reflect the stand of the newspaper's owners and editorial board.