

BACK TO SCHOOL POST-COVID-19: ISSUES, CHALLENGES & RECOMMENDATIONS

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Preface

Malaysia is one of a handful of countries which had prepared for the eventual arrival of the Covid-19 outbreak, although in hindsight, many critics felt that we could have done more given the severity of the virus outbreak in China earlier in the year. Nevertheless, the government was right to invoke the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988, Police Act 1967 and imposed a Movement Control Order (MCO) when there was a real concern of a spike of cases by mid-March and closed all schools and institutions of learning with immediate effect.

That move has successfully prevented a widespread contagion amongst thousands of students and teaching staff across the country. The impact of school closure and the suspension of all academic activities in the subsequent weeks created another set of problems – disruption of the education process and learning momentum of students under “lockdown” at homes or hostels, and parents are wondering what is the next course of action by the Ministry of Education on teaching and learning post-Covid-19.

In recent weeks, the Ministry of Education has taken initiatives to air school lessons in national television (TV Pendidikan) and certain channels in paid-tv stations, as well as instructing schools and teaching staff to begin sending students homework papers and instructions via various media channels – WhatsApp group, Google Docs, school website, and online classes or discussions via Skype and Zoom (now suspended). These initiatives are meant to keep students remain the focus at home, and enable continuous learning with the added advantage of students having the guidance of their parents at home.

However, this move has its disadvantages as many students in remote areas, or areas without proper internet access or those who do not have the privilege of having smartphones or computers at home are inevitably left out from these online classes or lessons. It is pre-requisite for Malaysia to have good internet penetration ready for online learning, it is important to have good national broadband internet coverage and connectivity and that condition as the foundation must be laid out immediately.

Following the implementation of MCO beginning on 18 March 2020, many students who were staying in hostels of public higher institutions of learning were not able to return to their hometowns but after long deliberations by the authorities, these students were allowed to return home in batches in buses arranged by the ministry. Even if the authorities are convinced that the exodus of thousands of students would not pose a Covid-19 contagion risk now, but the risk and danger are there when students are required to return to their respective hostels or institutions when the MCO is lifted. Possibly risking emergence of new infection clusters - worse if education authorities are not tracking the students’ movement and the challenge of identifying clusters should one or more show symptoms of Covid-19 much later after their return to the hostels.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Higher Education is more concerned about the safety of the students’ in a prolonged lockdown in communal residences, and the impact of disrupted academic activities on their studies. With these underlying issues, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education must begin to find common areas for a decision to be made on continuing education and learning process during MCO and post-Covid-19 anticipating a much-changed social environment by then, creating

positive and productive activities via online platforms, and reaching out to students who are not connected to these platforms so they too could continue their education in the meantime.

Post Covid-19: Back to school

It must be acknowledged that it is a challenge to address all the issues faced by the education sector but the effort should not stop there. A more daunting task lies ahead when schools and institutions of higher learning reopen post-Covid-19 – how to ensure the safety of students and teaching staff?

Several possible challenges in preparing for post-Covid-19 or post MCO: -

- Safety of students in classes (proximity) and minimising risks of infection by silent Covid-19 carriers – how to ensure some form of social distancing
- Preparedness of teaching staff to manage students and deal with the psychological impact of social distancing, precautionary and Covid-19 preventive measures in schools and institutions.
- Availability of test kits and mass testing of students or teaching staff before being allowed to return to schools or institutions (detect and identify) so to reduce the risk of contagion or creation of new Covid-19 clusters
- The sanitisation of education premises, and the availability of regular disinfectant work at all schools and institutions

The question that arises from such situations would be when would be the right time to reopen schools and resume classes in institutions of higher learning? When that happens, it is clear that students should be allowed back to schools and institutions in stages, according to the severity of infection in the zones, and perhaps giving priority to those taking examinations this year. Again, the return of students to the hostels in institutions of higher learning must be properly arranged to prevent crowding. Post-Covid-19, education will be different. Social distancing would become a norm and face mask could be an essential accessory for everyone - months after the MCO.

The MCO was enforced mid-March, months after the beginning of a new semester in many private institutions and institutions of higher learning when students had paid for their tuition. During the lockdown, students were not getting their lessons and institutions would have to replace these “off” days by extending the semester at no further costs to students. At the same time, private institutions also need to continue bearing the costs of operations such as rentals and salaries of teaching staff. With their bottom line affected, would these institutions raise fees in the following semester or next year?

Considering that many countries around the world would be very cautious, if not entirely strict, with the entry of foreigners to Malaysia (to prevent imported Covid-19 cases), the number of international students' enrolment in many institutions would be affected. Malaysia would also need to rethink its higher education policy specifically the strategy for the development of the private education sector which relies heavily on international enrolments.

This study considers the possible situations arising from quarantine measures in the country. Based on the assumption that schools will reopen after 12 May 2020 with no further extensions nor near future implementation of MCO again, the first phase of the study is to discuss on existing problems in the education system in Malaysia prior to MCO that is now being enlarged during lockdown. Then the study moves on to exploring the challenges that schools face during and after MCO. The third phase of the study focuses on initiatives done by other countries whilst discussing the possibilities of implementing similar policies in Malaysia and its future implications with final conclusion and remarks.

POTENTIAL ISSUES POST COVID-19

Though it is necessary to shut down learning institutions to prevent spreading in schools, students are at a loss as they are then facing weeks to possibly months without receiving an education that is their right. However, it is not a simple case of switching teaching and learning methods from classroom interaction to online learning. The difficulties existed in Malaysia's education system and its shortcomings have been amplified in this sudden change. It is imperative to identify these problems before considering counteractive measures to overcome them. Ultimately, quality education and time should be the priority of the government lest the country fails its young generation.

E-learning Requiring Greater Internet Coverage and Connectivity

As e-learning began gaining traction in the education sector, a pre-requisite for it to happen is a strong Internet connectivity. As of the first quarter of 2017, Malaysia's broadband penetration rates reach 103.6% per 100 inhabitants and 81.8% per 100 household.¹ The figures are decent though not enough to ensure that quality e-learning can be catered to rural areas. As Wuhan's lockdown extended for a period of two-and-a-half months, it serves as a benchmark to deduce the potential length of Malaysia's lockdown.² Thus far, Malaysia's lockdown has amplified the problem that the country urgently needs greater national internet coverage and connectivity to push through e-learning in the nation. Technology and funding are vital to ensure the development of the platforms in the future.

Low Bandwidth and Expensive Services

Malaysia's internet connection is not one of the country's best feature. The network coverage in Malaysia is relatively slower compared to Singapore.³ Besides, there are students facing problems with internet accessibility which render the e-learning process ineffective.⁵ Furthermore, costly prices provided by Internet Service Providers effectively puts off low-income families to provide their children with better internet services. All these are barriers that the government has to be aware of for rural areas and lower income families to continue receiving quality education at home. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) has stated that the sudden surge in bandwidth demand during MCO has led to the slower internet speed in Malaysia. MCMC has also said that this will be a challenge for the Ministry of Education to continue providing online lessons with a slower internet speed.⁶ According to the Open signal report, Malaysia's 4G download speeds dropped from 13.4Mbps on average in early February to an average of 8.8Mbps last week from 23 to 29 March.⁷ Thus Malaysia needs to understand that online learning is only possible and will benefit all if there is greater national internet coverage and a high bandwidth to support the demands of the public.

Financial Difficulties and Opportunities in Rural Areas

Financial difficulties in families limit the material necessities that can be provided to each child to ensure they receive a proper education. The 2019 ICT Use and Access by Individuals and Household Survey finds that only 71.3% of households in Malaysia has access to a computer but 97.5% and 97.2% of

¹ <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/1Q17-facts-figures.pdf>

² <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-52196359>

³ <https://www.speedtest.net/insights/blog/internet-performance-malaysia-q3-q4-2019/>

⁴ <https://www.malaysianwireless.com/2019/05/opensignal-malaysia-mobile-internet-speed/>

⁵ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/17/mco-impact-of-digital-divide-deepens-with-e-learning>

⁶ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/04/09/mcmc-slower-internet-speed-in-malaysia-due-to-surge-in-bandwidth-demand/1854970>

⁷ <https://www.edgeprop.my/content/1670592/mcmc-bandwidth-usage-surge-causes-4g-download-speeds-drop-third-week-2-mco>

households have a television and radio respectively.⁸ Thus it can be inferred that the coverage of students via television is wider than online platforms. It is plausible that lower income families are unable to afford computers for their children and might not have a stable internet connection at home too. East Malaysia is particularly susceptible to being left out for e-learning due to the state's low internet coverage area and high poverty.⁹ Thus the government has to take into consideration the gaps and inequalities that exist between urban and rural areas and also accessibility to internet connection and digital gadgets.

Unfamiliarity with Technology in the Education Sector

Education also concerns the educators who are tasked with the responsibility to teach students knowledge and help them grow. Thus challenges that the educators face also needs to be taken into consideration. An opinion piece on The Star published on 24 March 2020 discussed the difficulties that educators faced that are being amplified in light of Covid-19 crisis, namely the readiness of the infrastructure, internet connectivity, and the mindset of both educators and students alike.¹⁰ As Professor Dr Abdul Karim Alias opined, "online learning and online education are no longer an option - it is a must".¹¹ Thus educators need to learn how to navigate around e-learning application platforms and use it to their full advantage. Technology is constantly evolving and, if well incorporated into education, can honed students to be more tech-savvy to prepare them for the future. Resistance towards technology in the education sector can only be detrimental in the long run and in emergencies as such with students losing out on their rights to receive a comprehensive education.

Progress Stalled for Special Needs Students

Special needs' students are also largely affected during Covid-19 crisis as they encompass a wide range of individuals from physical impairment to cognitive and developmental handicaps. The differently-able requires more specific methods to impart knowledge on them. A general system will be unable to cater to the needs of these students. Hence, it is prudent to discuss more personal attention that can be provided through a distance in case of future emergencies that prevents the students from attending classes.

Returning Back to School

Following the implementation of MCO beginning on 18 March 2020, many students who were staying in hostels of public higher institutions of learning were not able to return to their homes in other states. However, keeping students in hostels posed its own risk as densely-populated areas are more likely to become contagious hotspots. Yet sending students back to their hometowns could potentially spread the virus further into rural areas where hospitals and medical equipment are scarce. The Malaysian government had nevertheless decided to allow the planned and scheduled transportation of students in hostels back to their hometowns in view of the Ramadhan month. When these students return to the universities or colleges later, the challenge would be to ensure they do not carry the Covid-19 virus from and cause new clusters in education institutions. Thus far, disinfection schedules carried out from time to time must be looked into as quickly as possible to prevent the spread of the virus.

⁸https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=395&bul_id=SFRacTRUMEVRUFo1Ulc4Y1JILzBqUT09&menu_id=amVoWU54UT10a21NWmdhMjFMMWcyZz09

⁹ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/coronavirus-covid-19-malaysia-indonesia-school-e-learning-online-12616944>

¹⁰ <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/whats-your-status/2020/03/24/a-reckoning-for-online-learning-in-times-of-crisis>

¹¹ Ibid.

Challenges post-Covid-19

With a lockdown in place for more than a month and possibility of resuming education soon, challenges need to be identified to prepare schools and the education sector for potential upcoming problems. Potential problems include the safety of students, the ability of staff to deal with psychological impacts of students, the availability of test kits for students and staff alike, and the sanitisation of school premises. Questions concerning the reopening of private education institutions and tuition fees are also raised during this emergency. Further explanations of potential problems are as follows:

- The Safety of Students to Prevent Spread of Virus in Education Institutions - as students return to schools and universities, there is an urgent need to ensure social distancing is still carried out to prevent a 2nd rise of infection in education institutions. In the past, classrooms and lecture halls were packed with students and educators alike but new regulations would have to be in place before students return to schools. According to the recent updates of Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health, they were planning to introduce a set of new guidelines for schools, which will include the details of social distancing and the cleanliness of the corridors and common areas at school buildings.¹² However, the guidelines are still in progress and expected to be handed out before the reopening of the schools.
- The Ability of Staff and Educators to Manage Psychological Impact of Students - prior to Covid-19, the 2017 National Health and Morbidity Survey has published a report on adolescent mental health and found that Depression, anxiety, and stress are among the main causes of mental health to students.¹³ With the country in lockdown and the need to practise social distancing, this can have an adverse impact on the mental health of students. Isolated from friends and struggling to focus on studies at home, it requires more mental effort and poses a challenge to students who have to deal with unhealthy relationships at home. Children experiencing domestic violence cannot escape from their houses and this can have a negative impact with long-lasting effects on their mental health. Furthermore, students whose parents work in the medical sector are also facing more emotional and psychological stress without the company of their parents and the worry for the safety of their caretakers.
- The Availability of Test Kits for Students and Staff Alike - with MCO scheduled to be lifted in mid-May, students and staff are expected to return to education institutions. To reduce the risk of contagion, mass testing kits need to be available and in place to check for infections. However, the disruption of production in many factories and countries meant that supply is low.¹⁴ Furthermore, other countries are also trying to get testing kits as their infection rates increases. Thus it is harder to get testing kits to determine infections.
- The Sanitisation of Education Premises - Regular disinfection and sanitisation needs to be carried out in education institutions at all times and not just in times of crisis. However, insufficient funding to education institutions often meant that these precautions are forego in place of improving the resources of the schools. Then lack of detailed planning for regular cleaning in the past also means that schools are ill adept at dealing with a sudden demand to clean and sanitise the school buildings. It is also plausible that the cleaning staff are not well equipped with cleaning materials to do proper sanitisation. With Covid-19 crisis, this reintroduce the necessity of properly disinfecting schools and hostels to protect the students and staffs.

¹² <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/584625/schools-get-new-guidelines-after-mco>

¹³ Institute for Public Health (IPH) 2017. National Health and Morbidity Survey 2017 (NHMS 2017): Adolescent Mental Health (DASS-21).

¹⁴ <https://economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/global-cos-extend-a-hand-with-1m-kits/articleshow/74956182.cms?from=mdr>

Reopening Schools and Resuming Classes

As the Movement Control Order was extended the second time to 28 April 2020, the Ministry of Education (MOE) was urged by the public to consider extending this year's academic calendar for both schools and higher learning institution.¹⁵ At that point, students were weeks behind their lessons and though effort has been made by the Ministry of Education to broadcast lessons on television and online, not all students were able to access them. It was also unfair to assume that all students are equipped with proper learning spaces at home that can affect the quality of learning. Subsequently, MOE decided to postpone two major national school examinations - SPM and STPM.¹⁶ SPM has been confirmed to be conducted in the first quarter of next year and STPM to be postponed until August 2021. With the extension of the exam dates, the results of their exams would also be affected and thus the dates for university application and intake as well. Enrolment of Matriculation and diploma programmes are expected to be set up in July or August every year while degree programmes are expected to start in September or October annually. Besides that, the ministry also cancelled the Year 6 Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) and PT3 though they are considering alternative methods to evaluate these students.¹⁷ It is necessary to evaluate students as entry to secondary schools usually depends on their UPSR results and PT3 results will affect their following areas of study in Form 4 and Form 5.

Then with the delay in exams and academic schedule, students is also be expected to face a delay in their graduation as well. This delay affects graduates from both universities and vocational institutions in seeking jobs after graduation. A gap in the labour market is expected in the following year as students expected to graduate this year are affected. Then an influx of graduates in the year after next could potentially create a more hostile environment for first-time job seekers as potential graduates from 2020 and 2021 clash together. Graduates from low-income groups that requires them to obtain jobs as soon as possible to help with the family are faced with additional pressure with a delay in graduation. Alternative assessments of UPSR and PT3 are also being questioned regarding their quality of assessments and feasibility of the method.

Affected Enrolment Rate and Fees

As countries go into lockdown worldwide, the number of international students' enrolment in education institutions will be affected. In particular, higher education institutions would be more likely to be affected with a larger number of international students. Malaysia needs to rethink its higher education policy specifically on the development in the private education sector that relies heavily on international students. The intake of international students are expected to drop due to fear of being infected as Malaysia has a high number of infections in Southeast Asia.¹⁸ Then as lockdowns are also happening in other countries around the world with exams being cancelled or rescheduled, application procedures would come to a halt as students might not have the necessary qualifications to apply for a local higher education institution. Moreover, it is possible that governments might be looking into tightening visa issuance post Covid-19 crisis to better manage the migration of people between borders.

Then there is a possibility in a hike for school fees. The Movement Control Order was enforced mid-March, disrupting courses that have already been planned since last year in many private education

¹⁵ <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2020/04/02/moe-urged-to-extend-academic-year/>

¹⁶ <https://www.moe.gov.my/en/pemberitahuan/media-statement/penjadulan-peperiksaan-kpm-covid19>

¹⁷ <https://www.moe.gov.my/en/pemberitahuan/media-statement/penjadulan-peperiksaan-kpm-covid19>

¹⁸ <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200324065639773>

institutions. As students are not receiving the education they paid for, these institutions will have to replace their hours after MCO has been lifted at no further expense to the students. However, this is an increase in cost of operations for the institutions. With financial plans being disrupted at the beginning of an academic year, it is possible to consider that private education institutions might increase fees for the following semester or the next academic year to cover their costs.

Higher Operating Costs on Education Institutions

Many of the institutions run on a fixed annual budget and plan their finances the year before to decide allocations and funding to departments and resources for the school. During a lockdown, the education institutions are required by law to continue payment to their staffs. Though the move is to protect the employees from being laid off or furloughed unfairly by employers, it puts a strain on the finances of the institutions. High administrative costs and rental fees further burden the institutions to meet out expectations. Under these circumstances, the government needs to consider and plan how to assist the financial stability of the private education institutions in post-MCO to make sure that they will not be overburdened.

The necessity to provide more safety nets for these private education institutions ultimately benefits students in the long run. The burden of finances can easily be transferred over to the students in the form of increasing tuition fees. This is not an ideal solution as it then leaves out families that cannot afford the rates when education should be fair and available to all. It is possible that in order to offset financial burden more pressure is then applied to staffs and educators to finish work within a given time limit. Quality of education might be compromised to accommodate the amount of tasks to accomplish to keep costs low.

Thus far the challenges of post-Covid-19 in the education sector are mapped out. Students are not the only ones affected by the Movement Control Order. Staffs and educators are also being affected with jobs being held by a thread. The issues presented prior to a lockdown and the challenges surfacing during a lockdown are necessary when discussing further recommendations to overcome these problems.

STAKEHOLDERS' COMMENTS

As the education sector is highly affected by a lockdown, stakeholders with the students' best interest at heart have come up with their comments and suggestions on steps that the Ministry of Education have implemented meanwhile. It is necessary to take into consideration their concerns before further discussing on recommendations needed.

Forecast Results to Be Allowed for Conditional Admittance

The delay in SPM and STPM have brought on challenges to university enrolment, possibly combining two different batches of students in the next year. Then in private higher education institutions, enrolment runs for 3 semesters in February, April, and September respectively. Local national universities begin their academic year in September with a spring intake in February. Delays in taking SPM and STPM meant that students are unable to submit an application to universities before their closing date. Thus the president of Malaysia Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu), Datuk Dr. Parmjit Singh, has recommended allowing school-leavers to use the forecast results instead.¹⁹ This statement has gained support from the Sunway Education Chief executive officer, Elizabeth Lee, and she has added recommendations that special entrance exams or other forms of assessments such as work submitted

¹⁹ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/17/avoid-delays-in-enrolment>

and projects done in school also could be used as an alternative entry requirements.²⁰ Enrolment for international students can also be considered along the same lines to avoid a low intake. The Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS) has suggested that the Ministry of Education (MOE) to allow the new recruitment of international students in local university by accepting the application of submission of forecast results as well.²¹ These suggestions would certainly solve university intake problems as the universities are only offering conditional acceptance instead of confirmed acceptance. SPM and STPM results are still important in deciding if a student's application is successful to a higher education institution.

Quick Release of SPM and STPM Results

In the past, SPM and STPM results take about 3 months to be released. Assuming that the Movement Control Order is lifted soon and national examinations held as planned in February and August for SPM and STPM, the results would only be available in May and November. Students would have wasted an extra year trying to apply for university using forecast results but then have to defer education for a year whilst waiting for their national examination results to be released. Again, Dr Parmjit Singh, president of MAPCU, suggests that the ministry can refer to Australia's matriculation, or A-level examination board models where results are released after 8 weeks.²² Students can then continue with their application to higher education institutions after that.

Cancellation of National Examinations

Nonetheless, if the Ministry of Education is unable to ensure continued progression of the academic year as planned, it would be prudent to also consider cancelling the national examinations for 2020. Sunway Education Chief Executive Officer Elizabeth Lee opines that a delay in national examinations will become a snowball effect in the next few years and will cause further challenges to the enrolment rate of private higher education institutions. An example cited is Cambridge International that has decided not to proceed with examinations for May and June 2020 in countries outside the UK.²³ The papers include Cambridge IGCSE, Cambridge O Level, Cambridge International AS & A Level, Cambridge AICE Diploma and Cambridge Pre-U. However, they have also recognised the possible disadvantages that students might face as a result of these decisions. Thus, they plan to work with schools to assess the student's achievements with other available evidence and receive grades and certificates from Cambridge International as a substitute.

Then as UPSR and PT3 are officially cancelled, National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) President Aminuddin Awang has expressed concerned that the students' academic performance and ability could be evaluated through Primary School Assessment Report (PPSR). The PPSR is able to provide four components of information including classroom evaluation, sports activity and co-curriculum assessment, psychometric assessment.²⁴ These are the possible measures that the Ministry of Education can look into to evaluate students' academic performance in place of UPSR and PT3.

Introducing Social Distancing into Academic Settings

Social distancing is a huge challenge for schools in ensuring the health and safety of staffs and students due to the limited spaces available in school premises. National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) secretary-general Harry Tan outlined the main challenges teachers face once MCO is lifted including

²⁰ https://www.sinchew.com.my/content/content_2255377.html

²¹ https://www.sinchew.com.my/content/content_2257197.html

²² <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/17/avoid-delays-in-enrolment>

²³ <https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/news/news-details/view/update-from-cambridge-international-on-may-june-2020-exams-20200323/>

²⁴ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/584793/teachers-can-students-cope-2021>

conducting group activities and teaching whilst implementing social distancing.²⁵ He suggests the Ministry of Education to roll out a Social Distancing Pedagogical Training module in schools once and provide necessary training to the teachers. Other than that, educators have also recommended adopting alternate days to teach different levels of students and to bring back bisessional education so that students need not congregate together as much. The suggestions have their drawbacks in terms of teacher resources and longer working hours for the administrative staff, but it does provide more social distancing to schools.

Dealing with Psychological Impact of Students

As mental health is a valid issue among adolescents in Malaysia, MCO can result in psychological impact due to social distancing and isolation. International Islamic University Malaysia lecturer and psychiatrist Dr Rozanizam Zakaria recommends “buddy system” to encourage students to pair up and look out for one another to help tackle mental health problems.²⁶ According to the Ministry of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS), depression, stress, and anxiety can impact people in isolation and faced with worry and fear about the spread of the virus.²⁷ Though a university “buddy” might not completely eradicate emotional and mental health issues, it can reduce their effects if patients receive support and encouragement from their peers.

Access to Internet for Lower Income Families

As educators and families living in rural areas are unable to access the internet whilst lower income families cannot afford computers, education is hindered significantly at home.²⁸ NUTP thus urged the Ministry of Education to understand the difficulties of the educators and students in their course to push for online learning. More attention needs to be given to those who cannot afford computers at home and also to provide for a stable connection to enable e-learning.

²⁵ https://www.sinchew.com.my/content/content_2256207.html

²⁶ <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/guide-teachers-to-prepare-for-the-new-normal-FK2279315>

²⁷ http://www.moh.gov.my/moh/resources/Penerbitan/Garis%20Panduan/COVID19/Annex_33_Mental_health_and_Psychosocial_support_23032020.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/04/17/limited-internet-access-among-issues-faced-by-rural-teachers-during-pdp-ses/1857745>

CASE STUDIES OF SELECTED COUNTRIES

As countries across the world go into lockdown, it is expected that schools will be closed too to prevent the spread of the virus amongst students. Bloomberg estimated that almost 90% of the world's students are no longer attending classes as of March 28.²⁹ However, Singapore, Australia, Sweden, and Taiwan did not close down their schools even with a high number of infections across the country. Thus the management of these countries that still kept their schools running and preventing infections within the school premises should be consulted.

Singapore

Singapore has kept their schools opened until April and implemented safety measures to protect staffs and students during that time.³⁰ Before closing down schools in April, Singapore complied fully with guidelines issued by the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), Unicef, and World Health Organisation (WHO) in disinfecting schools, providing hygiene supplied in education institutions, and promoting hygiene practices. Mass gatherings in schools are also suspended with lunch breaks and after-school programmes broken into small groups. Students and staffs also have to declare their travelling itineraries before they are allowed to return to schools in case they have visited countries that has a high number of infected cases. Then daily sanitisation is carried out in school buildings and national schools have to meet the standards for hygiene and sanitisation set by the government. If there are suspected of confirmed cases of Covid-19 within a school, the school will be closed immediately for a period of 14 days to prevent an outbreak amongst students. Finally, information and advice for students and parents from World Health Organisation about hygiene are distributed and shared so that parents can make informed decisions concerning the virus. The measures Singapore has taken in the past has helped protect schools from becoming another contagious hotspot for the virus to spread in the country.

Taiwan

Taiwan has so far been successful in keeping its number of infections low compared to other countries.³¹ International health experts credit this to Taiwan's early intervention by imposing travel bans and leveraging on its manufacturing sector to provide face masks to the public.³² Further innovative initiatives are carried out by schools by putting up dividers on desks to reduce the risk of infection.³³ Temperatures of students and staffs are also taken before they can enter the building. These methods ensure a slow spread and containment of the virus in Taiwan. Then winter holidays are extended in February to allow epidemic-prevention supplies to arrive, preventing a shortage of supplies in the market.³⁴ The supplies are then distributed to schools before they can be reopened. The Taiwanese government has also allocated funds for substitute teachers to be brought in as well in case teachers are infected. The Taiwanese government has been quick in responding to the outbreak of cases in China and despite its close proximity to the country, Taiwan has managed to keep its number of infections low. Being wary and monitoring the situation closely has also served Taiwan well in preventing a further spread of the virus into its rural areas where medical infrastructures are scarce.

²⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-27/should-schools-close-to-fight-virus-these-countries-say-no>

³⁰ <https://whichschooladvisor.com/hong-kong/school-news/what-lessons-can-schools-learn-from-singapore-and-thailand>

³¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/taiwan/>

³² <https://www.dw.com/en/taiwan-coronavirus/a-52724523>

³³ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-03-13/taiwan-school-uses-dividers-during-lunch-to-counter-coronavirus>

³⁴ <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16690/taiwan-prompt-action-to-stop-the-spread-of-covid-19-and-keep-schools-open-and-safe>

Australia

Though Australia has around 6,654 cases with 74 patients dead due to Covid-19, schools are still open for the time being to allow parents with limited childcare options to continue working.³⁵ Many schools have access to cloud-based platforms like Google G Suite, Microsoft Teams and Adobe Connect for online learning. In some of the states, the government has planned to equip their virtual classroom capability by progressively making few units of works of different standard of students to be available through the online learning websites.³⁶ For students and staffs still attending schools, the government has also prepared “practical guidance and advice” to reduce the risk of virus transmission.³⁷ The guide includes social distancing, risks to vulnerable populations in schools, hygiene, environmental cleaning and psychological impact of students. Schools are also called to reduce the use of common areas and after-school activities. Flexibility in learning is also being carried out in schools to provide a choice for students and staffs to stay at home. The availability of existing infrastructures to conduct distance-learning has long been in place in Australia. Thus schools are well adapt and flexible in their approaches to conduct lessons either in person or via the internet. Then advices are distributed so that parents are well aware of the dangers of Covid-19 and are able to better discuss them with their children. Furthermore, placing an importance on the mental wellbeing of students also reduces their risk in becoming depressed during the lockdown period.

Sweden

The Swedish government has chosen to remain open for businesses and schools compared to their European neighbours. Though the number of cases in Sweden is rising, Sweden has continued to maintain its stance in freedom of movement within the country.³⁸ Sweden maintains that a lockdown and border closures lack scientific evidence to prove their effectiveness against the pandemic. However, they have taken necessary precautions and established hygiene guidelines in schools to reduce the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, their medical sector is still holding up and Sweden’s Public Health Agency had commented that they encouraged people to continue exercising and going outdoors.³⁹ Sweden’s case is more unusual as they have different public and social policies with vastly different cultures. Their medical sector is also stronger and able to withstand the pressure from a high influx of cases. Malaysia by comparison needs to take our medical sector into consideration when lifting MCO to prevent another surge of infected patients that will put a strain on the medical staffs.

³⁵ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers>

³⁶ <https://www.itnews.com.au/news/how-aussie-schools-are-preparing-for-a-covid-19-shutdown-539770>

³⁷ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-advice-on-reducing-the-potential-risk-of-covid-19-transmission-in-schools>

³⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-sweden-education/swedish-parents-fret-as-schools-stay-open-amid-european-virus-shutdown-idUSKBN21E2NX>

³⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/sweden-avoids-full-lockdown-pm-insists-restrictions-continue-200420173945004.html>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having considered past issues, present challenge, concerns from stakeholders, and case studies from other countries, recommendations can then be put forth to encompass the concerns of all parties involved.

Launching National E-Learning Platforms

One of the biggest issues during this crisis is internet connectivity and e-learning platforms for students to receive a comprehensive education via distance learning. Examples taken from China and New Zealand shows that the government can cooperate with private sectors to build national e-learning platforms in case of another crisis that halts education in schools. For example, creating a national cloud learning platform can be done by cooperating with major technology companies stationed in Malaysia such as Huawei and Google. China has launched their national learning platform for students with cooperation from China Mobile, Alibaba, Baidu, and Huawei.⁴⁰ The platform is enriched with resources promoting an all-rounded education including mental health and classic literature.

New Zealand conducts remote learning via Zoom, Google classroom, and emails.⁴¹ With a combination of these learning platforms, it is easier to provide learning materials to students. Homework and lectures can be carried out from the comfort of the homes. Steps to use the system is also provided to educators so they can access their teaching materials easily too.

Then considering the needs for special needs students, parents are also invited to learn access to e-learning platforms to help their children in the learning process. With the training provided, parents can then guide their children at home and improve their learning conditions.

Distributing Individual Learning Devices and Ensuring Connectivity

As a lack of infrastructure for students is a legitimate concern, the government can look into providing individual learning devices for B40 families to ensure that their children will not be left out during distance learning. These initiatives can be done by cooperating with major technology companies in Malaysia to sponsor smart tablets or laptops to students. Rural areas also have a limited coverage of the internet. The government needs to then build cell towers at targeted areas to ensure better coverage in rural areas. The plans can involve local telco companies such as Maxis, Celcom and Digi, and also cooperation with foreign technologies companies to offer special rates to students to make internet connections more affordable.

As most households own a television compared to a computer, distance learning can also be conducted via national TV channels. More transmission towers are needed to provide better reception in rural areas especially in East Malaysia where families can live deep into villages. Teachers in New Zealand will offer to help students through the phone and Singapore has a Singapore Student Learning Space that student can call in to request for assistance.⁴² ⁴³ These measures help students with financial disabilities to achieve a more comprehensive education.

⁴⁰ <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/23/WS5e786ac4a3101282172814b0.html>

⁴¹ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/414313/covid-19-lockdown-remote-learning-begins-for-new-zealand-students>

⁴² <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/414313/covid-19-lockdown-remote-learning-begins-for-new-zealand-students>

⁴³ [https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/syllabuses/singapore-student-learning-space-\(sls\)](https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/syllabuses/singapore-student-learning-space-(sls))

Combine Technology and Learning

One way of ensuring that education is combined with technology is to push through reforms in education institutions. As technology becomes more and more advance, students will need to be introduced to digital infrastructures sooner or later. It is via digitalising the classroom that distance learning can then be achieved in the long run.

Hygiene Management and Practices in Schools

Covid-19 shows society the importance of practising daily hygiene and keeping good hygiene habits. With schools scheduled to be reopened after lifting the Movement Control Order, disinfection of school premises needs to be carried out regularly. School buildings need to be cleaned and sanitised to limit the spread of the virus.⁴⁴ The frequency of sanitising surfaces is also important as Covid-19 is expected to survive on surfaces for a prolonged period of time.

Then hygiene rules need to be implemented with students returning to hostels and living in close-quartered areas. Guidelines can be put together to be distributed in education institutions and hostels can implement stringent measures to ensure that students abide by hygienic practices as much as possible. Social distancing is still encouraged to avoid overcrowding of students in one area. Assemblies, sports, and large events should still be cancelled for a period of 3 months before conceding.

Staffs are also encouraged to undergo training to be prepared for new rules and regulations to be implemented in schools after they reopen to students. China has conducted a series of rehearsals prior to reopening their schools and come up with plans in case a student or staff is suspected of an infection.⁴⁵ These measures ensure that school staff are familiar with the procedures in the event that an infection occurred and understand the safety protection features of the school.

Vigorous Testing in Education Institutions

With schools reopening and students returning from their homes, health checks are necessary to carry out immediately to detect early signs of flu to prevent a surge of the virus. Staffs and students must undergo health screenings and also submit their travel itinerary in case some form of travelling has been carried out during MCO. Furthermore, visitors, staffs and students will need to undergo sanitisation before entering any education institutions. Universiti Sains Malaysia reported that an automatic sanitising tunnel costs RM1500 to build.⁴⁶ The Ministry of Education can consider building sanitising tunnels for schools to ensure that schools are kept clean.

Then testing kits should be distributed to schools prior to reopening to detect any cases of infection even without symptoms of the flu. Malaysia can seek help from neighbouring countries to ensure the continuity of testing kit supplies. In April 14, Malaysia announced that we will share our findings with experts and scientists from ASEAN along with China, Japan and South Korea to find a vaccine for the flu.⁴⁷ This can be expanded to sharing medical and testing kits in the region.

⁴⁴ https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4

⁴⁵ <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/sh/2020/04-02/9145662.shtml>

⁴⁶ <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/581781/usm-researchers-prove-automatic-sanitising-tunnel-can-be-built-rm1500>

⁴⁷ <http://english.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/malaysia-share-findings-covid-19-cure-asean-and-plus-three-partners-238357>

Flexible sick leave policies for both staff and student should be carried out meanwhile to ensure that those who are sick can choose to stay at home instead of being burdened with red tape. This will further deter the spread of the virus and prevent schools from becoming virus hotspots. Emergency contact lists with hospitals and governmental health departments should also be updated in case of an infection. A temporary health clinic can also be set up in schools in case of an illness. If education institutions have sufficient funds, health clinics should be set up for the long term and sanitisation of school buildings must be carried out regularly.

Provide Targeted Care and Counselling

More counselling sessions is recommended to be carried out in schools to help students overcome the mental and emotional impact during isolation. Teachers and school assistance can undergo basic training to identify early signs of stress, anxiety and depression before the situation worsens and refer students to qualified therapists immediately. Caring hotlines can also be carried out as an initiatives by schools to help students through their workload as they can struggle to continue after a gap in their education. This might then reduce the stress students are facing. School counsellors should also undergo additional training to detect signs of domestic violence at the homes of students. Regular interviews with students to gain their trust is necessary to understand their backgrounds. This can further reduce the impact of domestic violence on the mental health of students.

New Grading Arrangements and Shortened School Breaks

As the Ministry of Education has announced to cancel UPSR and PT3, new substitutes for students' assessment must be considered. A possibility is to use a combination of marks from school assessments, assignments, and co-curriculum activities. UNESCO published a recommendation commenting on Latin Americas classroom-based assessments in place of national examinations as a fair assessment of a students' capabilities.⁴⁸ As UPSR scores are needed to continue secondary education in Malaysia, a continuous assessment of students' performances in class is a fair substitute for the exam.

SPM, Matriculation and STPM students can also use past assessments to apply for higher education. The percentages of assignments and school assessments will need to be restructured in light of the current situation, but this method does not delay students from applying and starting their degree education. Then a quick return of SPM and STPM results is necessary so students can confirm their places in university and prepare accordingly before the start of the semester.

As MCO is extended for the third time, the government may consider delaying the national examinations again to allow students to have more time to catch up on their studies and be assessed fairly and accordingly. This measure has also been implemented by China and Europe.^{49 50} Nonetheless, delaying national examinations is not ideal as it does entail more problems in the long run. To counter this problem, school breaks can be shortened to allow students to catch up on their education and recover on their studies. Extra classes can also be held on weekends for SPM and STPM students to finish the syllabus.

Reduce Application Time for International Students

The numbers of international students enrol in Malaysia is projected to be low after Covid-19. As Malaysia's private education sector relies heavily on the intake of international students, a low number of enrolments can cause financial difficulties to these education institutions. Some initiatives can be carried

⁴⁸ <https://en.unesco.org/news/exams-and-assessments-covid-19-crisis-fairness-centre>

⁴⁹ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/how-covid-19-affecting-schools-europe_en

⁵⁰ <https://edu.sina.com.cn/gaokao/2020-03-31/doc-iimxxsth2840682.shtml>

out by the government and education institutions alike to make Malaysia more appealing to international students.

A shorter application time and more streamlined student visa application route can be implemented to make it easier for foreign students to come to Malaysia and study. Courses that follow international standards are also more likely to attract international students to choose Malaysia as their destination of study. These factors combined can combat the decrease in the number of international students in the country.

Relief from Government

Private higher education institutions (PHEI) are likely to be hit hardest within the education sector and they are a vital part of Malaysia's education system. The government needs to recognise their worth in society and come up with financial aids or incentives to help PHEI through this crisis and also ensure the quality of education for the students enrolled with them. A temporary tax relief can be provided to PHEIs to ensure they can cope with their rising management and administrative costs whilst not passing the baton to students. Incentives targeting their rental costs can also be carried out to reduce the costs of PHEI. Subsidies on buying more infrastructure to introduce e-learning for students can also be given out by the government to begin distance learning and prepare the education sector for the future. These measures can ensure the continuance of private higher education institutions that have proven time and again to produce high quality students for the country.

Home-schooling for the Time Being

Understandably parents would like to keep their children in the safety of their homes until the virus is gone. However, the feasibility of home-schooling is called into question. Firstly, it relies on the education level of the parent acting as the educator at home. Secondly, it also requires the parent to understand the national syllabus of the country and to update them accordingly. Thirdly, professional training is required for parents to impart correct knowledge and information to their children. Finally, a proper environment and adequate resources are needed to ensure a successful home-schooling. However, for families that can provide home-schooling, it is an alternative to send children back to school where they risk getting infected by being in crowds again. Though Malaysia's Education Act 1996 requires compulsory attendance for children of primary school age, parents who wished to educate their children privately are not prosecuted.⁵¹ Thus the education sector can consider home-schooling for families that fulfil the criteria to ensure that students are kept safe at home whilst still following the national syllabus accordingly.

Preventing Similar Scenarios in the Future

The recommendations veered towards ideal situations but it managed to point out the shortcomings of the country and parts where our education system has failed the students. With the advent of IR 4.0, Malaysia should already have its basic infrastructure and hardware in place. However, it takes a pandemic to show that these infrastructures are still lacking especially in rural areas. Implementing better internet connectivity and larger areas of coverage will not only bring forth IR 4.0 and industrialised the nation but also bring about better e-learning to the students.

A pandemic also shows the country where basic hygiene habits and understanding were sorely lacking before. Sanitisation and proper disinfection has not been a priority for many until the spread of Covid-19.

⁵¹ <http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/LOM/EN/Act%20550.pdf>

Education institutions have not been prepared with regular cleaning and disinfecting schedules that should have been carried out in the first place. Thus, the crisis is a waking call for education institutions to emphasise on daily sanitisation of the school premises and hopefully continuing the practices in the long run. Flexible working schedules and sick leaves should also be in place as the country moves towards a new digital age.

Then the existence and necessity of national examinations is called into question as schools are forced to shut down and education stalled. National examinations exist to provide a standard benchmark for students across the country, but its existence and quality has been queried in the past.⁵² The quality of teaching cannot be vouched for across different schools in different parts of the country. As such, it is unfair to all students in taking national examinations by assuming that they have all received equal and comprehensive education. The government should double its efforts in ensuring that the teachers are up to standards on a 5-year assessment basis to ensure quality of teaching. Students' progress in school should also be taken into account as they are then assessed over a longer period of time instead of one exam. Though national examinations are necessary to ensure a standard remains in the country, it should not be rigid in its implementation and dismiss those who have performed poorly in national examinations.

Understanding mental and emotional health of students will also take centre stage after MCO. Malaysia failed to recognise the importance of mental health in students and did not understand how prolonged stress and anxiety can lead to depression that will affect an individual's daily activities. It is time that Malaysia puts more effort in recognising the dangers of psychological issues if left untreated and place more emphasis in training more psychologists and psychiatrists in the country. These measures will not only benefit the education sector but society as a whole as mental health can affect anyone at any time.

The importance of private higher education institutions is highlighted during this period. PHEIs exist to provide an alternative route to education for students who are unable to enrol into national universities. They allow these students to obtain a higher education still and provide more career options when they graduate. Thus the government needs to come up with stimulus packages, incentives, and financial aids to help PHEIs overcome this period of difficulty and not compromise on their quality of education.

In short, the virus highlighted much of the shortcomings in the education system. However, with proper implementation after the spread, Malaysia can improve on its education system and strive to reach international standards in the long run. The country has much to offer to its diverse and high quality students that will shape the nation's future. Our education policies must ensure that we do not fail our young generation.

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⁵² <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/03/27/decentralising-malaysias-education-system/>