

As e-learning becomes the new norm during the pandemic, underprivileged students turn to online initiatives to secure a secondhand laptop.

By ANGELIN YEOH
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LAST March, 19-year-old student Siti Nur Damia Dahalan posted a tweet on social media asking for help to purchase a secondhand notebook.

At the time she was in the first semester of her geometric engineering course at a polytechnic in Ipoh, Perak and the movement control order (MCO) had just been announced.

Students like Siti Nur Damia had to conduct their studies via open and distance

learning (ODL) which requires pupils to attend lectures online and submit assignments through email, for example.

"I meant the tweet as a joke and did not expect any responses," she said, as she was able to handle ODL initially via her smartphone and expected MCO to be lifted by May, which would have allowed her to return to campus.

However, in an advisory on Oct 2, the Higher Education Ministry recommended all public and private higher learning institutions to switch from physical to online for enrolment for new and

returning students due to an increase in Covid-19 cases.

Now in her second semester, Siti Nur Damia said she's finding it hard to do her assignments without a laptop.

"I need to complete some of my assignments using *AutoCAD* software. I've been asking a classmate to help but eventually I need to get my own laptop," she said.

She has since started a home business selling fried tofu and even delivers the food on her own.

On days when she has deliveries, she

would get up at 7am to start cooking and fulfil the orders before classes starts at 10am.

"I plan to save at least RM2,000 for a laptop which can support the software I will need for my studies," she said, adding that she is also looking for work at night after classes.

She doesn't want to burden her parents or older siblings, as they have other commitments, and has set her mind to get a laptop on her own.

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Siti Nur Damia is just one of many students finding it difficult to cope with ODL during the pandemic without proper equipment.

Rheanne Wong, the co-founder of non-governmental organisation (NGO) StandUp Malaysia, said she noticed a lot of students sharing their difficulties on platforms like Twitter during the pandemic.

These students have been caught unaware as they previously relied on computers and network facilities in their campus, she added.

A smartphone is not an ideal device for attending online classes, typing out assignments or sitting for an online exam, she said, adding that some programs are only available for PCs.

To help the students, the NGO started the #Laptop4Siswa initiative, appealing to the public to donate secondhand laptops to deserving university students.

"We screen our applicants before matching them with donated laptops. We ask the applicants to provide details such as their parents' payslips so we can be assured that the laptop is going to the students who really need help," she said.

Wong, who is a full-time student, said the NGO has received more than 2,000 applications, with a majority coming from public university students in Sabah.

"We have an applicant who wrote in saying her mother worked as a cleaner and is only earning about RM600 a month, and doesn't have the financial means to buy a laptop for her studies," Wong shared.

Making it work

So far #Laptop4Siswa has received about 50 laptops and managed to hand out nine to students in Sabah, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.

Those who are keen to donate can fill up a form on its website (bit.ly/tech_standup), she said, adding that she is also reaching out to corporate sponsors for aid.

Getting additional funding to fix the laptops before handing them out to applicants has been a challenge, Wong said but she is grateful businesses have come forward to fix them at no cost.

"Some of the secondhand laptops have faulty components that have to be fixed first. We can't hand them out and expect the students to deal with the repair," she added.

Another organisation that is answering the same call is Liga Rakyat Demokratik (LDR), which started getting requests for notebooks from students when it joined forces with other NGOs to offer food aid.

Going the distance

Its legal technologist and consultant Azira Aziz said LDR, a platform for youth empowerment, has been receiving requests from students, mostly aged 18 to 24, since it kicked off its Laptop For Mahasiswa (bit.ly/tech_ldr) initiative last month.

"They come from underprivileged backgrounds all over Malaysia. They are mainly using handphones for assignments, classes, quizzes and exams," Azira said.

It has become somewhat of a financial challenge for the NGO, as most people wanted to sell their laptops to LDR instead of offering them for free.

"Frankly, it is not easy to find people willing to donate refurbished or old laptops, as they usually purchase and use them for a long time.

"We are fortunate to have received a few working laptops for free. We do a quick check and reformat them before passing the devices to the students

"We have not set a target on how many students we want to help. Even if we help one student, it would make a world of difference to that person, but if we help 10 or 50, it would be even better," she added.

Universities too have stepped up, initiating their own programmes to help students.

In July, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) in Kedah started an initiative to provide 200 secondhand laptops to students from low-income families in the B40 group.

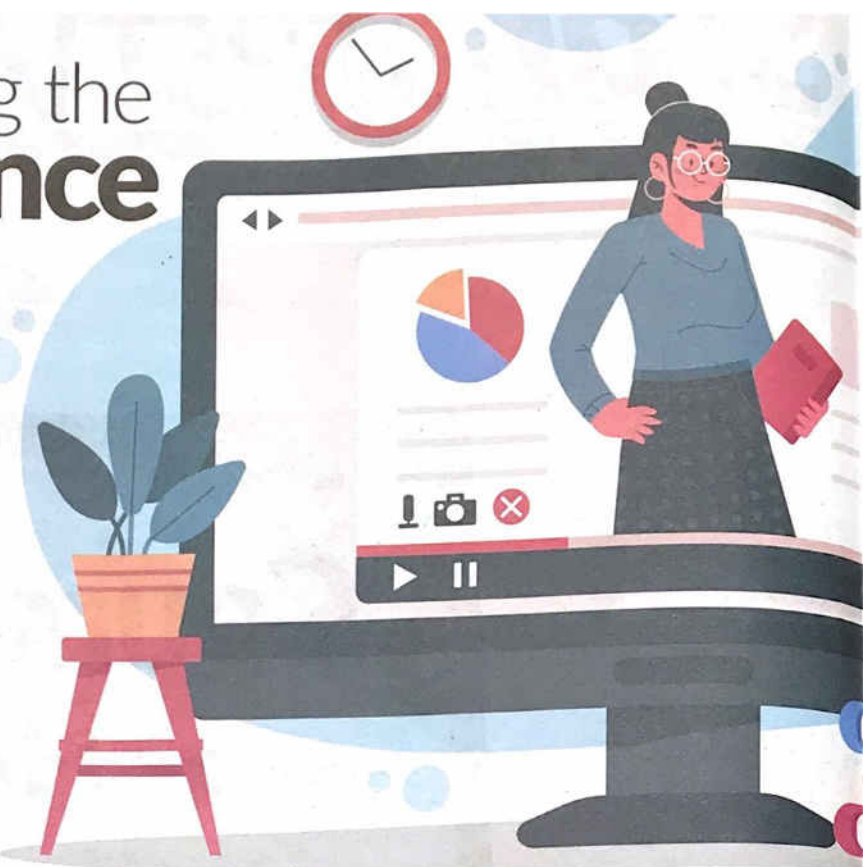
"Our research found that 70% of UUM students in the B40 group were struggling with ODL," said Dr Rajwani Mohd Zain, UUM director of student support and services.

The research also showed a quick solution was needed, said Dr Muslimin Wallang, director for UUM's alumni association.

"We reached out to those in our alumni association and asked if they could donate to the initiative to ease our students' burden.

"We are aware that some students are already worried about how their parents are going to cope during the pandemic and we have to do what we can to help," he said.

UUM's initiative successfully secured enough funds to donate 200 laptops, said Rajwani, adding, "Even though we've met our goal, the initiative is ongoing. We are



still accepting applications."

Meanwhile, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) in Terengganu has come up with initiatives for B40 students such as subsidising Internet access and offering loans to purchase laptops.

"The students reached out to us with issues they faced with ODL, which we highlighted to the university. It immediately responded with programmes to help the students," said Muhamad Ikmal Firdaus Mustafa, president of the student representative council at UniSZA.

Scammers on the prowl

Though Siti Nur Damia is aware of social initiatives online, she is cautious about applying for any.

"I decided not to apply because I'm not sure if they can be trusted. What if they are just scammers looking to exploit desperate students?" she said.

She is not alone, as Wong said applicants for #Laptop4Siswa informed her that some of the online initiatives became uncontactable after receiving their per-

sonal details.

"It's sad that there are selfish individuals who want to cheat these students.

"I would always remind the students to ask for proof such as pictures or posts of successful initiatives.

"Go through their social media accounts or website diligently to check if they can be trusted," she said.

Muhamad Ikmal Firdaus urged students to seek help from their university or student council first if they needed support during the pandemic.

"I don't want students to fall prey to scammers or irresponsible parties. I've reminded them to come to us if they face any issues, be it food, ODL or lodging. We will do our best to help them," he said.

Rajwani, on the other hand, had to lodge a police report against a private Facebook group that was using UUM's logo and claiming to help students by offering job opportunities.

"I was alerted about this group and was concerned that they were

targeting students who had received loans from the National Higher Education Fund (NHEF) at the time.

"I didn't want them to be fooled into giving their money to register for non-existent jobs," she said.

Help is at hand

Rajwani advised students worried about the pandemic affecting their academic performance to speak to their lecturers.

"I believe most lecturers are willing to show flexibility at this time such as giving students more time to submit assignments or allowing them to use whatever medium is available to them such as WhatsApp to send their reports," she said.

Lecturers are also aware that some students are taking on part-time work, she added.

"I have heard of students selling nasi lemak in their free time and even becoming agents to sell products.

"We understand that there are students facing financial hardship at this time and the university is



SITI NUR DAMIA DAHALAN

Has started a home business selling fried tofu to earn money to buy a laptop.



RHEANNE WONG

"StandUp Malaysia received more than 2,000 applications from students appealing for secondhand laptops."



AZIRA AZIZ

"Remote learning during the pandemic feels like 'privileged access' to most people, especially those in the B40 group."



MUHAMAD IKMAL FIRDAUS MUSTAFA

"UniSZA offers loans to B40 students who need to buy a laptop for remote learning."



DR RAJWANI MOHD ZAIN

"Lecturers are willing to show flexibility, as they understand the students' struggle during the pandemic."



Doctors fight 'infodemic'

By JOHN TOZZI

THERE is no shortage of what US President Donald Trump might call fake news about the coronavirus posts floating around social media, with plenty of it coming from his own Twitter account. That's a problem for a growing number of US doctors.

When the virus first hit the United States, Trump said it would disappear "like a miracle". He's since touted unproven therapies, cast doubt on government scientists and denigrated masks. After his own recent bout with Covid-19, he told his audience, "you're going to beat it", referring to a disease that's killed more than 220,000 Americans.

Physicians must now add countering misinformation to their protocols for treating Covid-19.

Michigan doctor Farhan Bhatti sees it in his daily practice. First his patients insisted the coronavirus was a hoax. Then they begged for a Trump-hyped malaria drug they thought would protect them. Now they say they won't get a vaccine that actually might.

Scientific inquiry over the months since the SARS-CoV-2 virus emerged has revealed a lot about how it spreads and how to treat the disease it causes.

Yet every day Bhatti sees patients who reject that evidence, sometimes at the expense of their own health.

"The ones who had sort of succumbed to the misinformation have been very difficult to treat medically," said Bhatti, a 35-year-old family physician who runs a clinic for low-income patients in Lansing, Michigan.

People's understanding of the facts shapes their behaviour, which in turn affects their health and their risk of spreading the disease.

"Conspiracy theories and misinformation about science did exist before Covid-19, but they're more deadly now," Bhatti said.

Even before the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic in March, the group warned of an "infodemic": a flood of information, both accurate and not, "that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it", WHO said in a report.

Growing distrust in science combined with a proliferation of wrong information have made it harder to take care of patients, said Susan Bailey, president of the American Medical Association and an allergist/immunologist in Fort Worth, Texas.

"We have never seen a devastating pandemic like this play out in real time on the 24-hour news cycle, with social media dominating the conversation," she said.

"It's incredibly hard to filter out what's real and what's not."

Bailey said she's had patients with asthma ask for medical notes to avoid wearing masks at work, requests that she denied because wearing a mask doesn't interfere with breathing.

Other patients are so fearful of the virus that they resist getting needed medical care, which also endangers their health, she said.

Before the pandemic, the AMA implored social media companies



Physicians in the US must now add countering misinformation to their protocols for treating Covid-19. — AFP

to address misinformation about vaccines online. In April, the group also called on elected leaders to "affirm science, evidence and fact".

That hasn't happened and one of the big reasons is Trump. The Cornell Alliance for Science identified the president as the "largest driver" of Covid-19 misinformation in a recent analysis of 38 million articles.

Trump's falsehoods on Covid-19 include saying repeatedly that it will go away, promoting the malaria drug that turned out to have harmful side effects, suggesting a vaccine would be ready by November, and accusing federal health agencies of an agenda to sabotage his re-election campaign.

In response to rising misinformation about the pandemic, Bhatti teamed up with other physicians to form a group called Doctors Organized to Communicate Science (DOCS). It's a project of the Committee to Protect Medicare, a political group that has opposed Trump with ad spending. (Bhatti also testified in defence of the Affordable Care Act on Oct 15 at the Senate confirmation hearing for Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett.)

Bhatti said the DOCS group is a non-partisan spin-off dedicated "to provide facts based on science, just non-partisan hard facts".

Armed protesters

Bhatti's non-profit clinic, called Care Free Medical, is about a mile (1.6km) from where armed men protested shutdown orders this past spring inside the Michigan state capitol building.

Cars heading to the statehouse that day lined Saginaw Street. Bhatti said protesters showed up at the district office of the local Democratic congresswoman, which is in the same office building as Care Free Medical, and harassed some patients going into the clinic.

"They had the largest megaphone that day," he said. He doesn't think the armed opponents of the state's stay-at-home order represented mainstream sentiment.

But every day he encounters people who either believe misinformation about the virus or have at least been influenced by it.

"I've had patients flat-out look me in the face and tell me this whole thing is a hoax," he said.

One patient who spurned masks early in the pandemic got Covid-19 and suffered shortness of breath for two months, Bhatti said. Her grandmother also got the virus and died from it. Later she told him that she wished she'd taken it more seriously and worn a mask.

When Trump said he was taking the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine as a preventive measure, Bhatti had to turn down patients who asked for it.

"I was the villain for not giving them medicine," he said. The drug was briefly evaluated as a potential therapy, but the Food and Drug Administration revoked the authorisation after finding no benefit and possible harm.

Bhatti also fears that patients won't take an eventual coronavirus vaccine if one of the experimental shots now in trials is approved.

Only half of Americans in a recent Gallup survey said they would be willing to take an FDA-approved vaccine if one were available right now, down 11 percentage points from August.

While Bhatti says many of the misconceptions he battles are most prevalent among his patients who support Trump, distrust of vaccines is bipartisan.

Some patients on the right entertain conspiracy theories about Bill Gates's involvement in the vaccine effort, and others on the left don't trust Big Pharma.

He hopes to persuade all his patients to trust the science. But the resistance he encounters takes a toll.

"It's really hard to not take it personally," he said.

"They're telling you that they trust you to manage their insulin, but they don't trust you to give good health advice as it pertains to Covid-19." — Bloomberg

open to helping in any way such as offering counselling to those who need it," she said.

Last Friday, Higher Education Minister Datuk Dr Noraini Ahmad said RM3.8mil had been allocated to aid new students for the 2020/2021 academic year.

Over 76,100 students are expected to receive RMs50 in cash to purchase data plans and other necessities.

Also, an additional RM24mil has been set aside to provide 320,396 B40 students with SIM cards, and cash or vouchers to subscribe to data plans.

All higher education students will also be given a special discount to purchase laptops from companies such as Samsung and Acer, she said.

Noraini said public higher education institutions had worked together with the ministry to identify the students who need the assistance.

Both Wong and Azira are appealing to the public to contribute to their initiatives by providing functioning

laptops that can support basic programs for video conferencing and completing assignments such as Microsoft Word and Excel.

"We have students saying they feel helpless because circumstances such as financial difficulties are preventing them from getting the education they deserve.

"Those who are able to get a laptop from us have told us they feel very thankful to be given the opportunity to excel in education because they have a valuable resource now," Wong said.



Wong (right) with two students who received a laptop through the #Laptop4Siswa initiative. — RHEANNE WONG



DR MUSLIMIN WALLANG

Appealed to the UUM alumni for donations to purchase 200 laptops for its B40 students.