

## REINTEGRATING TOURISM

# Now is the right time for digital health passport

**T**HE tourism industry is reeling from the reduced travel due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The local hotel sector has reported millions in losses as hotel rooms remain mostly closed. The country has lost billions in revenue from the hospitality sector.

Before the pandemic, the tourism industry was generating close to RM40 billion yearly for the nation. The blame falls mainly on restrictions on international travel.

The sector has been hoping for support from domestic tourism to tide over the downturn. But the ban on inter-state travel is not helping.

Despite the data showing inter-state movements having minimal impact on the spread of Covid-19, health authorities remain adamant that the ban should stay, citing isolated cases in Kelantan and Terengganu during the earlier lifting of the ban.

The real data, shown in the daily reporting, says the workplace should be the prime target for



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control, especially workers' overcrowded accommodation. This remains unresolved.

The aviation sector is one of the sectors that is most severely impacted by the pandemic. All the airlines around the world are going through tough times. Most are crying for bailouts. Malaysia Airlines is no exception. Recent news of renewed government bailout is welcome news for the company, which has been bleeding losses for years now.

The pandemic merely adds to the injury. Whatever it is, unless international travel can resume, all such bailouts mean nothing to the business. Only a revival in

international travel can save the aviation industry from further bleeding. Only a return to the pre-pandemic frequency of travel can bring back jobs to the sector.

It is no secret that during the pandemic, many pilots have had to exchange their captain caps for a chef hat, hawking food in the suburbs of Kuala Lumpur. A stark contrast from the high-flying life of their piloting days.

A recent webinar on the future of the aviation industry, hosted by the Academy, provided some useful clues on how to best deal with the stalemate. The panellists were made up of strong personalities from the aviation sector, including the AirAsia chief executive officer, a former aviation director-general and experienced analysts of the business.

Many suggestions were mooted for a way out of the pandemic-driven slump. But one that was intensely debated was about some kind of vaccine passport for air travel.

The idea was that air travellers should carry with them a docu-

ment that would testify that they have already been vaccinated and therefore do not pose serious Covid-19 risks to other travellers. Judging by the many views expressed in the media lately, many seem agreeable to that idea.

But many agree that for the scheme to work effectively, it needs to be an international arrangement. All countries must come together to develop the mechanism to operationalise the idea.

Not surprisingly, many countries have shown interest in implementing the vaccine passport idea. Such proof of vaccination for travel has been practised in some countries of the world. Those who travel to perform umrah and haj know that no visa will be issued without proof of vaccination against meningococcal or meningitis infection prior to travel. And the vaccination has to be renewed every three years.

The same applies to some parts of Africa and Latin America, where proof of yellow fever vaccination is required before one is

allowed to travel to the region.

And with digital technology becoming more common, it may be time to devise such a digital health passport to also include other health history details. The health passport should not just be limited to proof of Covid-19 vaccination.

For example, the information can include non-communicable ailments, such as hypertension, diabetes or cancer, and probably even information about the usual medications the traveller has been taking as well. Such additional information would come in useful during emergencies encountered while travelling.

In fact, digital passports should incorporate features that continuously monitor the health of the traveller. The technology for that is already available. This may be the right time to implement the digital health passport, which is good for health monitoring and supportive of the aviation business.

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