

Another year of online learning

EDUCATION is a dynamic process encompassing elements of learning, unlearning and relearning.

These elements are highly inclusive, with teachers and students continuously interacting with each other, and adapting to the surrounding academic environment.

Perhaps this synergy was most profoundly tested in the past few months, as teaching was predominantly conducted online.

Those who were adept at adapting managed information delivery succinctly, while others found themselves struggling to cope.

Predictably, there were voices within the academic fraternity calling for a reprieve.

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 students.

Educators lament that effective teaching and learning can only occur if content delivery is proficient, and online teaching may

regress this process.

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

Based on previous experiences, the possibility of inoculating the nation with another widespread, pervasive cluster originating from an exodus of students into universities is a very possible scenario.

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

Younger adults may be asymptomatic but they can 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 recent news report, where a majority of students returning to university from their hometowns were 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 could potentially lead to more infection cases being reported.

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

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

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

More quality, validated content is being shared onto social media platforms by our academicians 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 have also finally realised that a laptop or desktop computer can be much more than a means of consuming content, typing documents, or preparing slides; it can also produce original and accurate content by leveraging on a myriad of tools and applications.

The online delivery 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 able to digest the information at their own pace and time.

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

We communicate and connect more, exchanging not only educational information but also the occasional banter on messaging platforms. Such similar connections would otherwise be minimal, or

almost non-existent in the past.

Some sacrifice in terms of hands-on learning may have 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 new semester beckons, we are grateful that knowledge transfer can still occur in such challenging times.

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

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

Safety must be prioritised over convenience. Hopefully, with dedicated teachers and passionate students, we shall mature from this with tenacity and resilience.

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