

Pressing ahead with digitalisation

Internet connectivity must meet standards

A UNITED Nations study last year found that the impact of Covid-19 and the measures to halt its spread had created a “lost generation” of students, whether in secondary schools or universities, worldwide. School closures meant students missing out on learning and all the educational experiences associated with physically attending classes, including interactions with other students. What is worse is that the UN study revealed that children from families with weak educational backgrounds were not able to make up for the loss of learning, and many countries are now paying a hefty price for their slow response in digitalising schools and universities. As Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin puts it the other day, Malaysia needs to accelerate the move towards digitalisation of the education system to improve the quality of education in the country. That is one of the main lessons this pandemic has taught us. As we are forced to turn to online learning, we become painfully aware of how far behind we are in this aspect. Again, as Muhyiddin puts it: “One lesson we learned, we do not have the ability to create an education system that can cater to this need as we don’t have the facilities for students to learn online.”

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Many parents, he said, could not afford devices for their children and in order to improve the quality of the education system, both teachers and students should be equipped with the devices that would enable them to teach and learn anywhere. Therefore, as part of the digitalisation process, the government is looking at providing such devices. But, this is not the be-all and end-all of the whole process. What must also be done is that the content needs to be updated and improved so that they can be digitalised. We must look at providing training for teachers as the digitalisation of education and the direction in which it is headed will now require skills that they may not have. As for content, there is a silver lining. The pandemic’s impact has meant that global digital education content is expected to grow by as much as US\$34 billion. This not only means our students will be benefiting from such growth, but those in the education sector may also gain from a slice of the pie.

By far, perhaps, the biggest problem we have to overcome is the lack of Internet access and connectivity in the country. How many reports have we seen about people in rural areas, especially, it would seem, in Sabah and Sarawak, who have had to take extraordinary measures, such as climbing hillocks or even tall trees, just to get better connectivity? How many children have we heard of who suffered injuries because of such actions? But, if we are being totally honest, it is not just rural areas where Internet access can be terrible. Even in urban and suburban settings, there are places where Internet connectivity does not meet standards. Hopefully, with 5G networks coming soon to Malaysia, things will improve. Chances are they will, but even such high-speed connectivity will not help if we do not spend on the infrastructure to handle it.

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