

# The value of transitioning online

After close to a year of instructional delivery off campus, it is worth looking back on both the gains and pitfalls for higher education institutions

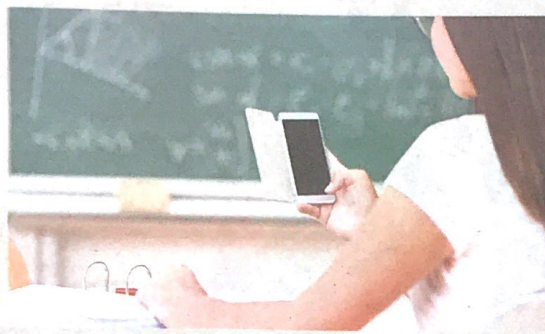
HIGHER education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia, and indeed around the world, endured an unsettling past 10 months characterised by uncertainty around the reopening of campuses, resumption of face-to-face teaching, restrictions on travel and immigration, and changing regulatory guidance.

Within a short period, HEIs had to quickly adjust from face-to-face to online learning, and from a physical campus workplace to one that is remote and virtual. The transition had been far from easy, and not without a great deal of frustration from educators, students and parents alike.

Having been compelled to adopt something that must have felt like one big digital “experiment”, I suspect most HEIs will be glad to return to their campus comfort zones and face-to-face teaching. Some argue that things will never quite return to the way they had been. Though that remains to be seen, it is certainly worth reflecting on the lessons from our experience with online learning so far.

## Lesson 1: Technology provides lots of opportunities

Educators will now be a lot more familiar with Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, Canvas, Google Classroom and other forms of digital learning technology. Used effectively, there's no doubt that such technology can enhance the student learning experience, and there's no reason we should stop using it post-pandemic. Some argue the future of education is blended – a structured mix of face-to-face and online learning. Most of such technology existed before the pan-



**Not just tech:** The physical campus experience is more important now than ever. – Photo: 123rf

dem, and it is up to educators and institutions to remain convinced of their value and continue to invest time, money and resources in them.

## Lesson 2: A physical campus experience remains core

Despite all the attention on digital technology, it's clear that the physical campus experience is more important than ever. For many, university is a social experience which allows for peer interaction, personal development and a sense of community – things which are evidently hard to replicate in a virtual setting. Virtual activities clearly have a place but are a poor substitute for on-campus activities. International students, in particular, look forward to experiencing what Malaysia has to offer as a country and education destination. While digital technology won't displace the physical campus anytime soon, it may reshape the learning institution; universi-

ties may now think twice about whether they really need to build more lecture halls and consider repurposing existing lecture space for different needs.

## Lesson 3: Digital divide and technology inequality

Even today, we discover a digital divide where not all students have their own computers, or the high-speed Internet required to participate in live virtual lectures. This may be due to financial reasons, or simply because people live in an area with poor Internet connectivity. Provisions must be made to accommodate such students, which may include loaning laptops, providing mobile Internet access, and allowing students access to campus or learning centres with suitable facilities.

## Lesson 4: The dark side of technology

Despite the engagement that is now possible with digital technology, such as live group sessions

and online communities, the feeling of isolation felt by many students has not gone away. Student well-being and mental health has been a recurring theme during the global pandemic. In particular, students living away from home have not had the same level of support from family, friends and others whom they often take for granted on campus even though HEIs have maintained student support services online. Examinations and financial strains only add to the pressure. Online learning, prolonged and devoid of any face-to-face contact, may prove to be detrimental, leading to increased levels of loneliness, stress and anxiety.

## Lesson 5: Perceived value of online education

In Malaysia, students and parents seem to attach greater value to a campus experience versus one that is predominantly online, regardless of any scientific evidence to the contrary regarding learning outcomes. It will be difficult to persuade people otherwise. In Malaysia, as also seen in other countries, there has been a groundswell of public opinion to reduce tuition fees, which only reinforces the perceived value of on-campus education versus online education. The reality is that students are also paying consumers, and will decide what education experience they value and are willing to pay for.

## Lesson 6: Accreditation uncertainty

In Malaysia, diplomas and degrees are accredited by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). Certain programmes, such

as medicine, engineering and quantity surveying to name a few, are subject to further recognition by professional bodies without which their value would be diminished. In most cases, the accreditation is based on face-to-face learning and contact hours rather than online learning. While the MQA has given leeway for institutions to deliver courses online during the global pandemic, it is unclear if online learning will be accepted for accreditation purposes post-pandemic. Should this be otherwise, it will dampen any motivation for HEIs to continue with online learning. If HEIs are to be encouraged to innovate in the online learning space, they should be able to do so without the fear that their accreditations will be at risk.

Though online learning has been a convenient solution for HEIs in the face of the pandemic, it may not be the game changer that some profess it to be. Digital learning has its limits and campus-based education is, and will likely remain, the preferred choice for many students in Malaysia.

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