# Reality for Malaysia's university students: Online learning challenges, stress, workload; possible solutions for fully digital future until Dec

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BY IDA LIM



A student takes online lessons during phase three of the movement control order in Shah Alam. — Picture by Miera Zulyana

KUALA LUMPUR, May 30 — Universities in Malaysia may already have practised online learning for students before the Covid-19 pandemic struck as a supplement to lectures, but the government's plans to completely do away with physical classes and go fully digital for lessons until the end of this year may not go as smoothly as envisioned.

After more than two months of universities physically staying shut with lessons conducted online due to the movement control order (MCO) and conditional movement control order (CMCO), the Ministry of Higher Education earlier this week announced that all institutions of higher learning

will be fully conducting online-only learning activities until December 31, except for five categories of students.

In theory, not having physical classes and activities on campus seems ideal as the risk to exposure and spreading of Covid-19 can be reduced with the avoidance of crowds forming and with students learning from the comfort of their homes. But what is the experience like in reality?



Caretaker of UMS' student representative council Kellin Wong said there is a real challenge of internet coverage, especially for students living in rural areas in Sabah. — Picture by Miera Zulyana

**Motivation and internet coverage**

Kellin Wong, caretaker of Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) student representative council, noted that online teaching methods or e-learning are generally already in place and used every semester in public universities, but said a full switch to online learning would come with certain challenges.

"However, if the physical semester converts to fully online, students might not be able to adapt the use of online teaching/lectures/tutorials/assignments as well," she told *Malay Mail*.

Wong noted that some students may lack the motivation and have less interest to follow through with lessons conducted online, due to a lack of self-discipline or because they prefer face-to-face learning.

"Online learning is more to self-learning which students can be absent from the online class and use the poor internet problem as an excuse. I understand that some might really have difficulties accessing the internet, but online learning will reduce the efficiency of learning [compared to] face-to-face," she said.

But at the same time, Wong said there is a real challenge of internet coverage, especially for students living in rural areas in Sabah, noting that "the line is really, really weak there" and to the extent where reaching them by phone would be difficult.

"Also, our biggest challenge is that some of the students have poor internet access in their hometowns. It is difficult for them to reach out for such online assessment and also lectures," she said, confirming that the issue was not about gadget ownership but more on internet connectivity.

Wong said that this has resulted in university lecturers putting in more effort, noting as example that her lecturer had extended submission dates for assignments by students due to the internet access issue.

Saifullah Baiduri, president of Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam Se-Malaysia (Gamis), said the initial phase of the implementation of online lessons saw both university students and academic staff having to adjust to the new norm.

"Indeed, the best learning method is face-to-face because it is more familiar and understood by the students. With the implementation of online classes, they will be experiencing problems asking questions, especially those who have difficulties speaking out in a crowded environment, both face-to-face and online methods," he said.

While the government's initiative together with telcos to provide a free 1GB internet quota daily was very helpful to students who needed to attend online classes, Saifullah said limited internet access and poor internet coverage especially in rural areas is still a concern.

He highlighted that situations of lagging internet speed hamper the learning process as it would cause students to miss out on parts of classes via live video sessions, noting: "When dealing with internet problems during class, students will not know what to ask since the topic discussed is already covered."

"This requires additional effort from the affected students to search for additional material or referring to their friends who finished the class. The expected long-term effect is, the affected students will most likely be facing stress issues, increased depression occurrences, then eventually give up and that will leave bad remarks on their education journey," he said.

A general view of Universiti Malaya after the government announced the Movement Control Order, March 17, 2020. — Picture by Hari Anggara

**Workload stress; mixed opinions**

University of Malaya Association of New Youth (Umany) president Yap Wen Qing said most students have adapted to the use of e-learning during this MCO and CMCO period and were generally doing fine, except during the earlier periods when they were familiarising themselves with the systems and means of communication.

"However, some students asserted their struggle over the e-learning mode due to stress, as lecturers tend to give more assignments in e-learning mode," he told *Malay Mail*.

He noted that some students have suggested using a grading system of pass and fail for this semester for those who are unable to keep up with their studies, but said UM had opted to maintain the normal grading system while allowing students to drop certain subjects for the semester if they feel overwhelmed.

"In my opinion, the university should provide the students with the opportunity to choose their preferred grading system so students have the freedom to study according to their pace and prevent from extending semester due to learning issues," he said, noting that such grading systems implemented in Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU) had worked well.

As for the differences between face-to-face learning in physical classrooms or e-learning, Yap said that this was subjective, with some students viewing e-learning as saving their time and energy spent on commuting, while other students may feel that interaction is more limited for e-learning and when it comes to group discussions carried out through video meetings and virtual chatrooms.

Yap said there has been no huge differences between classes held online or in physical settings when it comes to students asking questions, as they could do so during such classes if the lecturers choose to accept it then or subsequently in emails to lecturers.

Yap said it is common practice for most lecturers even during normal times to upload teaching and learning materials to UM's online learning platform with some providing extra notes to help students keep up now.

"The biggest issue lies in the teaching quality of the lecturers, we received feedback and opinions regarding the incapability of certain lecturers in grasping the technology to conduct e-learning during the earlier periods.

"Moreover, it is said that some lecturers do not conduct online classes but only provide notes and assignments to students, and some lecturers provide too many assignments to students and students are unable to complete it within time," he said.

Noting that UM had cancelled its usual survey that is held every semester for students to grade their lecturers' performance and the relevance of their course for this semester, Yap highlighted the importance of having an evaluation system to ensure the teaching quality is on-par and can be improved on for the next semester.

For students involved in final-year projects, hands-on courses have been replaced by their virtual version as access to labs and other facilities on campus is mostly prohibited now. — Picture by Yusof Mat Isa

**Final year students' worries; govt measures hailed**

For final year students, Yap said graduating is a key concern, with some worried they will have to extend their semester, as some are considering dropping some subjects for this semester due to stress.

"Yes, in order to graduate, students are required to complete a set of credit hours. If final year students drop a subject, causing them to be unable to fulfil the credit hour requirement, they must extend the semester, or they must take extra credit hours for the next semester if they are not final-year students," Yap said.

For students involved in final-year projects, hands-on courses have been replaced by their virtual version as access to labs and other facilities on campus is mostly prohibited now, Yap said.

This situation leaves students with the unenviable position of choosing either to carry out hands-on courses physically which would mean extending their semester and their graduation date as they will have to wait for face-to-face mode to be allowed; or to carry out all hands-on courses online in order to graduate on time despite losing some of the practical experience.

"Many students are worried about the employment rate as the economy in the country is not in good shape now," he said, noting that their concerns are also tied to having to miss out on practical learning for hands-on courses.

UMS' Wong said most final-year students are worried about whether they will manage to "Graduate on Time (GOT)", with those in programmes requiring laboratory work particularly worried about their progress and the effect of MCO.

"To overcome this, MOHE had come out with a really good point which allows final year students to continue their project which might need to use the resources of the university," Wong who is herself a final-year student said, noting that such students will at least be able to make arrangements with their lecturers and manage their final year projects.

Other concerns that final-year students have include living costs such as phone bills, accommodation costs, transportation fees, Wong said, adding: "I think that everyone is concerned about getting employed. We just hope to finish our studies as soon as possible."

Gamis' Saifullah said final-year students are generally concerned about the progress of their thesis preparation and their final project especially those who need to do lab work and carry out experiments, noting that the MOHE's decision to relax rules for final-year students has been greeted with relief.

Noting that internships are important for final-year students to equip them with actual working experience, Gamis said some students recently had their internships terminated early and their respective faculties were said to have approved these, but further noted that the final decision should lie with the faculties as they would know better regarding fieldwork.

Gabungan Mahasiswa Islam Se-Malaysia suggested that universities review the overall fees imposed on students by keeping tuition fee rates but reducing the fee for facilities, as most students would not be on campus to use the facilities. — Picture by Yusof Mat Isa

**Solutions for a smoother learning process?**

UMS student representative council's Wong said students should think of ways to overcome their current circumstances given the existence of affordable prepaid packages for the internet in the market, but also proposed the government work with telcos for affordable plans to help students.

"For students who have problems accessing the internet, I propose that the ministry offer some affordable student packages which provide sufficient internet data to students in [cooperation] with telecommunication companies," she said.

Umany's Yap said the university can provide online counselling sessions for students who feel stressed out by the e-learning mode and also free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) to enable students to learn new knowledge during this period of movement restrictions, also proposing coupons or vouchers for subsidies to some students for the purchase of gadgets for e-learning.

For underprivileged students who face issues of lack of internet access or gadgets for e-learning, Yap noted that UM had provided free data plans to those who applied, while gadget subsidies have not been announced.

"Students living in rural areas also faced the struggle of having limited internet coverage, the issue has not been resolved for now, except that they can return to the university during the next semester," he said.

"If the pandemic situation has improved, I suggest the university return to face-to-face learning mode with extra precautionary steps taken so that students can enjoy a full learning experience and resume societal activities.

"The ministry should give the university more freedom in making a decision instead of implementing a one-size-suits-all policy. Every university is different and they should have the autonomy to decide their teaching policies as long as it obeys the safety guidelines of the pandemic.

"The university should establish a transparent platform to inform students of every policy change, engagements must be done between the management and the students (townhall, forums etc.) to check and balance the actions taken by the management," he said.

Gamis's Saifullah suggested several solutions to be considered by the management of both public and private universities, including the refund of accommodation fees by 50 per cent or prorated to the number of weeks that the students had used the accommodation services.

Gamis also suggested that universities review the overall fees imposed on students by keeping tuition fee rates but reducing the fee for facilities, as most students would not be on campus to use the facilities.

Gamis said universities could also refashion the fees allocated to provide library or Wi-Fi services to instead fund and provide a "special pass" for students to access online learning materials, including those from paid online databases to facilitate their study from home until this December.

"The concern is about getting sufficient material to help the student continue their own learning process. If they live on campus, definitely they have direct access with books in the library.

"However, if they must continue the learning process at home, how can they get books, material and etc? So, it is a responsibility of the university to ensure that students can access unlimited e-books. Students need to continue their homework, their assignment, literature review etc," Saifullah said, noting that such a special pass would enable students to have free access to academic works online requiring paid access.

Alternatively, for universities that do not intend to provide refunds, they could instead provide services of equivalent monetary value such as by paying for high-speed internet for students studying at their home or at their hometowns, Gamis said.

Gamis said universities could also allow students to opt to drop certain subjects to reduce their workload and bring forward the semester fees for the next semester.