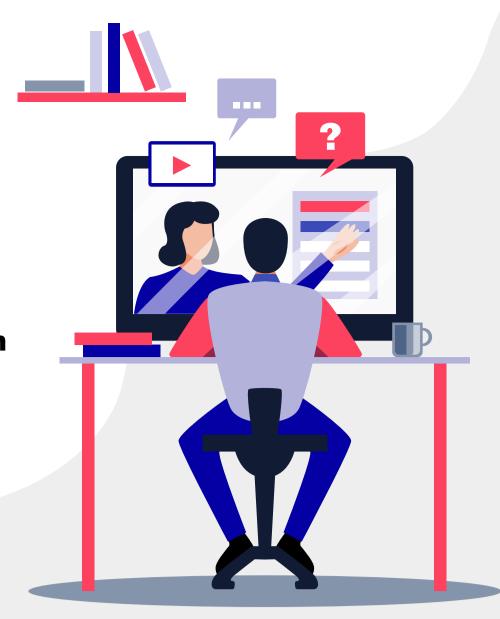# E-LEARNING, NOT COMPLETELY ALIEN TO UCSI UNIVERSITY

by

Professor Dato' Dr Ahmad Ibrahim
UCSI University
Faculty of Engineering, Technology and Built Environment

UCSI University ®

COVID-19 has not only created a health pandemic, but also economic and social upheaval throughout the world. The turmoil has spread fear to the entire world population. Experts believe that this may leave a long-lasting impact on the mental state of people around the world. Many theories have been suggested to explain this very disruptive phenomenon. Some conspiracy arguments have stoked even more fear and panic among the population. All such views have been actively circulated among the many social media platforms. The unending flood of fake news and claims make matters worse.

The WHO has prescribed safe distancing, practising good personal hygiene and avoiding large gatherings as measures to slow down the spread of COVID-19. In the absence of a viable vaccine and a proven therapy, this is one way to reduce infections, according to public health experts. Taking the cue from China, one country which has managed to tame the virus after almost three months of lockdown, many countries have implemented similar measures to reduce the rate of infections, as well as avoiding any alarming increase in cases which can overwhelm their health facilities. One of the factors contributing to the rise in the number of fatalities in many countries is the inability of hospitals to cope with cases.

The education sector is one which has been impacted by the lockdown, though not as severely as the tourism and hospitality industry. The imposition of the movement control order prevents the normal practice of attending lectures, examinations, laboratory practical classes, seminars, talks and conferences which are common knowledge delivering and sharing activities in the higher education setting. Some are envisaging that even when all the lockdowns are relaxed, the rising fear factor will make the higher learning education shift away from the traditional way of teaching and learning. Many universities are already using the online digital platforms to conduct their teaching and learning. Whatever it is, many predict a new normal will emerge from the pandemic. Universities must prepare themselves for the new normal.

At UCSI university, e-learning is not entirely alien to staffs and students. We have been practising it for years now, initially through the LMS digital system and now the improved Course Networking (CN) system. The CN in fact provides the digital platform to upload notes, announcing assignments, sharing opinions and communicating changes in lecture halls and other important announcements on exams, just to mention a few. Whatever it is, the university has long embraced digital learning, and this has proven to be a big help to the campus community. What COVID-19 does is to prompt us to expand our e-learning platforms to also include the actual teaching of our courses online. There is no other way we can deliver our classes, with the new normal of safe distancing prescribed to control COVID-19, except through the e-lectures.

Judging by the many online classes that have already been delivered during the initial phase of the lockdown, both staff and students have taken to the new modus operandi very well. There have been positive feedbacks from students on the new e-learning mode. They have heaped praises on staffs who have developed very creative ways of deploying the digital platforms. The usual final year examinations, which are deemed unacceptable under the rules of lockdown due to large gathering of students will be replaced by online assessments. However, all forms of online learning and assessment will have to abide by the quality high education criteria set by the MQA and, in the case of professional programmes, the relevant professional boards. For us in the engineering discipline, all our programmes are accredited by the Board of Engineers Malaysia. This ensures that our graduates are professionally accepted to work with engineering companies not just in the country but literally all over the world. Many UCSI engineering alumni find jobs with top engineering companies all over the globe.

I teach Technical Communication for engineers at UCSI University. My students are mostly in the second year of all the engineering courses, including chemical, mechanical, electrical and civil. A skill in technical communication emphasises on the ability to communicate across disciplines. This is because any typical business organisation does not just have engineers as employees. The CEO, for example, can be an accountant. I have always stressed on the importance of mastering the skills of technical communication if we are to have a good chance of progressing in our career to my students. The skills encompass writing effective technical reports, delivering persuasive oral presentations, and most important of all, mastering the art and science of critical thinking. All of these are very much needed in companies.

This is because in the workplace, professionals are often called upon to make decisions which solve problems and make improvements to the company's business. Often times, teamwork is of paramount importance. If there is one good example of an effective technical communicator, I would give it to the current Director General of Malaysia's Ministry of Health. His daily marathon press briefing on the state of COVID-19 in the country shows how a technical person, in this case a medical doctor, can deliver a briefing which is understood even by the man on the street. No wonder he has been getting praises from everyone in the community.

The Technical Communication course at UCSI University typically has many students, often exceeding one hundred. I find delivering lectures online using platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Team improves the learning significantly. This is because in a physical classroom, a large class presents a big challenge in terms of crowd control. It is normal for a class to have students of different level of learning ability. In a large class, students who are more focused on paying attention can be outnumbered by those who are less serious in learning. I find using online lecture helps to address such challenge. Student participation is also higher in an online lecture. Those who are shy to raise questions and offer opinions are more are more comfortable doing so in an online setting. This makes for a livelier interaction and improved learning. Taking attendance is also easier. I am confident that COVID-19, which has ravaged the world with fear, is also a blessing in disguise. It has opened up the possibility for the education sector to embrace and expand the digital e-learning platforms. I believe this will transform universities for the better.