

The New Normal for Higher Education

By

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A recent article titled, “UK Universities Hit by Virus” discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic rattles universities in UK. According to the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), British universities are under severe financial strain. One puts the cost since the March lockdown to almost 800 million pounds. It could get worse next year, if international students, stay away or are hit by movement restrictions. The potential student intake reduction may threaten around 30,000 direct jobs. They have already submitted for 2 billion pounds of government aid.

In Malaysia, universities are also not spared. Though not as bad as the tourism sector, universities, especially those privately funded, face a potential decline in revenue. Many have to reconfigure their business to cope. There are two major worries for the higher education sector. One has to do with their core business of teaching where they have to avoid the close contact in the traditional classroom. The other concern is whether students have the capacity to pay the tuition fees, in view of the many job losses and business closures. To resolve the classroom worry, universities can at least fall on digital learning. But the issue concerning fees is more challenging. This is where government support is imperative. After all, higher education is about preparing talents which benefit the nation. We will continue to need new talents to face new challenges.

The health impact on higher education intake is more worrying. Much has to do with the rising fear among people such as fear to travel, fear of a crowded gathering and fear of being infected. Such fears may even lead to serious mental health complications. The consequence for tourism is well known. For higher education, overseas students may also experience the fear to travel. Projecting the potential scenarios post COVID-19 is one way to strategise. Knowing the potential scenarios, universities are in a better position to plan, not only to mitigate the risks, but also to capture new opportunities. What then are the possible scenarios for higher education post COVID-19?

One scenario talks about a decline in international student numbers because of the mobility issues. International travel restrictions are expected to stay on for some time even after the movement control order is relaxed. In fact, some are even saying that many international students will have second thoughts about studying overseas. This has to do with the growing fear brought about by the pandemic. Under this scenario, Malaysian students may also be reluctant to go overseas. The decline in foreign students can be made up by the new opportunity to tap on local students.

Another scenario talks about the increase in remote work. It would now become the norm rather than an exception. Over the years, many do not view working from home as something productive. There is that element of distrust among employers about their employees working remotely. Many still insist on the physical presence at the place of work. But the pandemic has made it necessary because online work is the only way to deliver teaching and learning to avoid mass gathering and close physical contact. Some believe the online mode is an opportunity that will make learning more rewarding for both staffs and students. But this is challenging without a strong broadband support. In South Korea where broadband power is accessible nationwide, e-learning is a breeze.

Many agree the business model for higher education may be transformed. The current business model targets students mainly for the undergraduate programmes, both locally and internationally. Now, as a result of the experience from the disruption brought about by COVID-19, many are contemplating to diversify their revenue sources. Many are thinking of doing programmes for matured working students, not only for postgraduate programmes but also for professional courses. Whatever it is, collaboration will increase not only among local institutions but also among international partners. Many believe universities will have to collaborate more to be sustainable. International collaboration will increase where partners will share the business to cater to international students. With local institutions, there will be more collaboration in R&D. Many will enhance their position by collaborating more with industry and business. This will be the new normal. UCSI University which has built a long tradition of collaboration with industry is in a strong position to make it good in this new normal.