



The Surge in E Learning Puts Pressures On Nation's Internet

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Higher education is not spared from COVID-19. Not as damaging as the tourism and other economic sectors, but nonetheless disruptive. The conduct of teaching needs to change. Online delivery looks the likely option. Fortunately, most universities in the country were not caught flatfooted. This has surprised many. Since the early 2000s, they were already making inroads on the online practice. If we remember, Malaysia was among the first in the developing nations to set up Open University Malaysia in the late 1990s!

But the COVID-19 pandemic has created more urgency to migrate to e-learning. When the Movement Control Order (MCO) came into force on 18 March 2020, universities, both public and private, were challenged. Some likened it to a Big Bang experience, what with the unprecedented demand for teaching online. It is a far cry away from the usual brick mortar learning! Today, there is relative silence on university corridors. The usual symphony of rhythm and clutter had completely disappeared.

The work from home mode is now the new normal. The earlier distrust among employers of the work from home arrangement has simply dissipated. Somehow, this has been easily assimilated by Malaysian workers in both the office and university environments. Some are known to even work more than 45 hours a week now! In a press report on April 1st, most Malaysian broadband providers believed their internet service has performed well, even with an increase of 30% usage in the first two weeks of MCO. This may be true in the Klang Valley where there is easy connectivity. Even a marathon 5-hour online meeting is doable here. Other parts of the country may not be so lucky. Some researchers have claimed that Malaysia's internet infrastructure is under intense pressure due to the MCO. They expect it to be under intense strain as the digital deployment rises.

The fact that the nation needs to invest more in broadband is no exaggeration. As the nation prepares to fully embrace the digital economy, broadband is no longer a luxury but a necessity. We should emulate countries like South Korea, China and others which prioritise the investment in broadband as a prerequisite for nation building. It is therefore encouraging that the government is responding positively to such calling. In early April, MCMC issued a statement stating that all *"Local telecommunications and internet service providers are currently working around the clock adding bandwidth capacity to ensure the continued delivery of essential services during the MCO period. The telecommunications industry is working on improving network performance during this time through an additional investment of RM400million for infrastructure and network upgrades, as announced in the STIMULUS PACKAGE (PRIHATIN) recently."*

It is certainly an assurance by the government that the infrastructure network will survive the rigours of demand from all facets of Malaysian society in the coming months! In April 2020 analytics reported by SPEEDTEST, the Global Index showed Malaysia's ranking increased by 1 for fixed broadband to 38 in comparison to April 2019. However, during the same period, it dropped 5 places for mobile phone speeds to 98. This should be a concern. On a study by SPEEDTEST covering cities and states in Malaysia for Q3-Q4 2019 - Selangor had the fastest fixed broadband in Malaysia with 91.83 Mbps for download, 57.89 for upload and 14ms for latency. In Johor (ranked 5th in the list; Kuala Lumpur is ranked 2nd, followed closely by Negeri Sembilan and Putrajaya) the speed falls to 66.93 Mbps, 39.66 Mbps and 28ms respectively. There was a total of 16 regions (including Putrajaya and Labuan FT) reported.

Higher education is an important contributor to the economy. One estimate puts the annual income to the country from higher education as exceeding RM40 billion. And it is growing. In the growing era of digital learning, a reliable internet infrastructure is crucial. As of now, residents in Klang Valley right to Negeri Sembilan have excellent access of the broadband network. But the quality drops down south, up north and eastwards. It is surprising to see Sarawak and Sabah are 6th and 7th in the list. It is obvious that not all Malaysians undergraduates will have equal access to study in real-time under such condition. We have seen some complaints from students during the 8 weeks of MCO. The Government's commitment to inject RM600 million for free mobile data is a welcome move as it is vital to give easy access to all Malaysians. As schools expand their online engagement, the pressure will be even more. Hopefully the promised roll out of 5G will provide the much-needed tonic.