

# 10. Harmonising Global Higher Education: Optimise Learning in the New Normal

*Meng Kui Hu and Daisy Mui Hung Kee*

## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has brought numerous challenges to global higher education, affecting students and educators. Most countries closed their higher learning institutions to protect students from the deadly disease. Although most institutions adopt remote learning as part of the solutions, many find it difficult to sustain quality education. Moreover, many students could not adopt remote learning due to the lack of internet connection, mainly in rural areas. Besides, learning from home has also led to various mental problems for students, such as anxiety, depression, and stress. Therefore, higher learning institutions, students, and educators must take practical measures to overcome the prevailing challenges. In the long term, they should leverage the renewed opportunities post-COVID-19 in lifting global higher education to the next level.*

## Keywords

Change management, COVID-19 pandemic, Education, Higher learning institution, mental fatigue, Remote learning

## Introduction

In addition to disruption in socio-economy, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought countless challenges to global higher education, affecting students' and educators' social and emotional needs. Most countries closed their higher learning institutions to protect students from the pandemic as a containment measure. This action, however, generated other issues among the students and educators to some extent. At the peak of school closures in April 2020, 94 percent of students, or 1.6 billion children, were out of school worldwide. As early as 2020, around 700 million students were still studying from home. As for higher education, 220 million students were impacted by the closures of campuses globally (The World Bank, 2021b). In addition, the remote learning approach has created numerous difficulties for students – inability to cope with the new learning approach, lost focus, and lack of motivation to follow lectures effectively. Poor internet connectivity and inadequate devices to enable remote learning added further stress to the students. Besides, educators also face challenges

in conducting lectures through online platforms and assessing students' work remotely.

Consequently, the COVID-19 era has amplified the mental health of students worldwide. Findings from four countries in the Asia Pacific, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and China, revealed that 38 percent of the students reported mild or moderate depression, anxiety, and stress. In contrast, 20.5 percent reported severe or highly severe anxiety (Jiang et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected teaching and learning; only 2 percent of the institutions reported that teaching and learning are not affected. Two-thirds said that classroom teaching had been replaced by distance teaching and learning. The other one-quarter have suspended all activities.

Nevertheless, the institution is developing solutions to continue teaching and learning through digital or self-study means. Only 7 percent reported that teaching had been canceled (Marioni *et al.*, 2020). International student mobility has also been severely impacted. While students will miss out on social connections and one-on-one interactions with their peers and educators, higher learning institutions will be financially affected by lower international student intake. New international students in Malaysia only grew by 2,385 to 95,955 in 2020 (2019, 93,570), which is a far cry from the required average growth of 30,000 students per annum to achieve the targeted international students set in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), The Malaysian government aims to increase international students studying in the country to 250,000 by 2025 (Rajaendram, 2021).

This chapter will thoroughly evaluate and discuss the impact on global higher education to recommend sound measures that enable global higher education to re-emerge strongly from the pandemic. Given severe consequences on students and educators amid this pandemic, higher learning institutions and policymakers must promptly implement practical and effective measures to remove or minimize the obstacles students and educators face. Furthermore, in the long term, higher learning institutions can leverage the renewed opportunities post-COVID-19 in lifting global higher education to the next level. The profound opportunities are driven by the urgent need to accelerate digital adoption and reconfiguration of the current education system for the benefit of students and educators. With the wide adoption of online learning under the new normal, higher learning institutions can leverage more extensively on academic collaboration, enabling a broader learning exposure for students and educators.

## **Confronting Challenges**

Like in other past crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused numerous challenges to higher education worldwide. The closure of campuses for student safety compelled higher learning institutions to seek and adopt other feasible options for continuous education. Despite some unprecedented

challenges, both students and educators need to comprehend the challenges by confronting them positively. Following are the significant challenges caused by the pandemic, faced explicitly by higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

### *Remote Learning Adversity*

Before the COVID-19 era, face-to-face learning was the prominent channel for students to acquire knowledge. Within a short time, when the pandemic struck the world, this was changed dramatically – students were forced to adopt a new approach to learning through remote platforms. To a lesser extent, some students and educators struggle to get used to the new teaching-learning method. Even educators have to walk the extra mile in making remote education a success. Besides developing effective materials for remote education, educators are swarmed by online assessments of students' work. This added task can be significantly challenging for educators.

Moreover, some students find it challenging to stay focused and remain motivated when attending lectures virtually. Less conducive remote learning environments at home make life more difficult for some students. Although the average household size is officially 3.8 in Malaysia, the average size of the most prominent families goes up to 5.8 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Due to the higher number of school-going children in a household coupled with space limitations at home, students find it disturbing when concurrently attending different online lectures with the other siblings within the confined home environment.

### *Infrastructure Hindrance*

While internet connection seldom causes significant difficulty in developed nations, it poses a problem to many less developed and even developing countries. For instance, in some rural regions in Malaysia, the internet connection can be unreliable. The inadequate infrastructure and lack of internet access affordability hinder students from successfully adopting remote learning. Some students do not even own personal computers, which are necessary for remote learning. With the closure of libraries and the need to stay home, they have to rely on their mobile phones to follow online lessons, which is less conducive. In addition, some educators also encountered difficulty due to the lack of digital devices at home with enhanced capabilities to record lectures and administer learning and supervision (Azman & Abdullah, 2021). However, these obstacles are not something higher education and student-educators can resolve. It requires government initiatives to improve the overall digital infrastructure, intensifying its connectivity and quality internet services. According to the plan, expanding and upgrading the existing digital communication network to 5G under the Malaysia National Digital Network Plan would gradually ease the connectivity issues faced, particularly in rural areas (Aziz, 2022).

### *Mental Fatigue*

When students are driven to stay home and learn remotely as part of the containment measures, many students start to suffer from mental fatigue, primarily depression, anxiety, and stress (Jiang et al., 2021). The inability to interact with educators and friends made learning from home challenging (Razami & Ibrahim, 2021). Furthermore, the difficulties in adapting to new learning approaches amid the pandemic caused numerous stresses to the students and educators to a certain extent. Increased workload and assignments add tremendous pressure to the students. The final-year students are burdened with extra worries about employability upon graduation. Unemployment will further impact them financially and drain them emotionally. The situation needs immediate attention, without which it may lead to more societal problems in the future. While the challenges are inevitable, it is critical for students, educators, and higher learning institutes to comprehend the prevailing obstacles, enabling them to develop and execute effective solutions. They should also identify and leverage opportunities that may arise along with the pandemic.

### **Unlocking Opportunities**

Besides challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic offers a pocket of opportunities for higher learning institutions to recalibrate and reshape their education quality and overall operating system. The options, when capitalized effectively, will bring numerous benefits to global higher education. Following are the opportunities worth unlocking post-COVID-19 pandemic.

#### *Accelerate Digital Transformation*

In the new normal beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, global higher education will operate differently. Face-to-face interaction between students and educators may return, but the hybrid system in education is likely to remain. Mobile learning will become a critical part of the new learning approach. In light of this change, students and educators must upskill themselves to handle digital platforms more effectively. Razami and Ibrahim (2021) highlight that most students at higher learning institutes in Malaysia prefer a hybrid approach. The content is delivered online through live video sessions and pre-recorded videos. The most desired learning materials are online notes followed by video tutorials, quizzes, games, and animation. However, certain universities and colleges in Malaysia are caught flat-footed due to inadequate infrastructure and sources to support online learning within a short time (Sia & Abbas Adamu, 2021). For instance, the lack of fiber-optic networks resulted in slow internet connection in higher learning institutions. Separately, in optimizing learning opportunities in the new normal, higher learning institutions must also intensify digital adoption in raising the effectiveness

of the new teaching approach, comprising blended learning methods through face-to-face and digital platforms. Higher learning institutions need to enhance their digital learning platforms and integrate them with the dynamic learning management system, enabling smooth and seamless connections between students and educators.

### *Reconfigure Education System*

The pandemic has exposed some weaknesses in the education system around the world. At the same time, the pandemic also provides an opportunity for higher learning institutions to reconfigure the education system and establish updated programs and assessments (Sia & Abbas Adamu, 2021). Therefore, it is time for all education system stakeholders to review and improve the relevance and suitability of existing course contents in grooming excellent talents in the future. More so, new courses shall be created and introduced to keep students abreast with the latest development in the real world. For example, many higher learning institutions implemented various practical courses; the trendy ones relate to big data, business analytics, data science, and machine learning (Rindlisbacher, 2020). Likewise, universities have introduced some new courses in Malaysia to better prepare students for the future. Besides, the education system needs to be well managed with educator leaders to spur more effective pedagogy and a competent educational bureaucracy adept at using technology, data, and evidence (The World Bank, 2021a). To be effective, university leaders need to move away from their conventional protocol and resistance to adopting changes to the education system. They must recognize the professional burden educators face during the pandemic, hence realign more reasonable and realistic expectations of educators.

### *Academic Collaboration*

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual conferences have become a norm. The world has become borderless with people around the globe connecting, interacting, and discussing various subjects virtually. This has never been done so actively before the pandemic era. Meeting and listening directly to the top notched professors from the world's top universities have become a reality during the pandemic era. This apparent benefit arises from the pandemic. For instance, higher learning institutes in Malaysia can now invite distinguished professors from established universities to share their expertise with domestic students. Higher learning institutions should continue to engage renowned and prominent international educators and leaders for academic collaboration in the new normal. In addition to valuable lectures from prominent educators worldwide, a virtual platform also allows students and educators to carry out global activities more effectively. Consequently, global collaboration will allow students and educators to interact and learn more effectively through virtual platforms. However, the collaboration initiative can be

challenging to less known higher learning institutions in the global higher education arena. For instance, a medium-sized university in Malaysia may face difficulties convincing a world-renowned educator to address its students in a specific area of expertise.

Put, opportunities, if not leveraged effectively, will be a waste. Therefore, educators and students must strive to capitalize on the renewed possibilities for greater heights in global higher education.

## **Reimagining the Future**

Having experienced the challenges in social and emotional needs, students and educators would have gained adequate awareness of the importance of ensuring stable mental health while elevating the quality of global higher education. Therefore, all stakeholders of global higher education must take on a practical approach in executing their plans to optimise learning in the new normal. In their pursuit of achieving success, they need to adhere to the following disciplines.

### *Imposing Change Management*

When the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic mellows down to the new normal, the learning environment will be different from before. In light of the impending changes, educator leaders and students must adapt to change and move on with the renewed educational approaches. Educator leaders must believe in the need for change, enabling them to take charge and lead the way forward. Similarly, students and educators must also embrace new skills and abilities to acquire and disseminate knowledge through new approaches to the new normal. A new mindset is crucial in achieving the best possible outcomes when global higher education emerges from the crisis. Change management, however, is easier said than done. When the pandemic initially impacted higher learning institutes in Malaysia, the government strived to find effective ways to handle the unprecedented situation by allowing learning among university students to continue. The government changed the learning approach by developing new administrative measures to safeguard the delivery of programmes through remote online learning (Azman & Abdullah, 2021).

### *Systems and Support*

Systems enhancement involving technology and specific procedures can only be implemented with sufficient funding and technical expertise. In this aspect, higher learning institutions need to seek sufficient funding from the government to execute their strategic plans. Furthermore, higher learning institutions must proactively invest in suitable systems and support for long-term benefits. For instance, a secure, stable, and reliable mobile learning platform, is essential in driving the hybrid teaching-learning approach

a success. In Malaysia, various universities expanded and upgraded their digital learning platform to cater to broader and more effective adoption of online learning among students.

### *Adapting New Learning*

The hybrid teaching-learning techniques are likely to be used in the new normal. While this new approach is feasible, it requires more effort to be effective. Besides system and technical issues, the mental aspect of students, in particular, need to be addressed. In addition, students must be comfortable with the new approach, hence handling whatever stress that comes with it. Educators can play a critical role by providing valuable education and extending emotional support and counseling to students who face difficulties in their studies. Professionals must train them to mitigate the emotional and mental impacts on students. Higher learning institutes should also embark on structured programs to reduce anxiety, such as life skills training and mindfulness therapy, which have been validated to reduce anxiety levels (Sundarasan et al., 2020). The future of global higher education will be elevated to new heights when strategic plans are realigned and executed with a clear direction.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive changes to global higher education. While the higher learning institutes in the developed nations are coping better, their peers in the less developed countries face numerous challenges in maintaining quality education for the students. More so, some educators are also having difficulties disseminating lessons in the new normal. On the bright side, this pandemic offers higher learning institutions an avenue to revisit their existing policies and leverage renewed opportunities to improve the overall education system. UNESCO (2021) reiterates the need for higher education to reshape and refine for a better future in 2050.

Consequently, higher education must take on active responsibility for common humanity, promote wellbeing and sustainability, draw strength from intercultural and epistemic diversity, and uphold and create interconnectedness at multiple levels. Therefore, new approaches need to be implemented to enhance learning across the globe. This will help lift global higher education to the next level in the long run.

## **References**

- Aziz, F. (2022). 3,500 sites of 5G wholesale network to be set up. *The Star Malaysia*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/02/18/3500-sites-of-5g-wholesale-network-to-be-set-up>.
- Azman, N., & Abdullah, D. (2021). A critical analysis of Malaysian higher education institutions response towards COVID-19: Sustaining academic program

- delivery. *Journal of Sustainability Science and Management*, 16(1), 70-96. <https://www.doi.org/10.46754/jssm.2021.01.008>.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022). *Launching of report on the key findings population and housing census of Malaysia 2020, Press Release*. <https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/pdfPrev&id=akliVWdIa2g3Y2VubTVS MkxmYXp1UT09>.
- Jiang, N., Siaw, Y., Pamanee, K., & Sriyanto, K. (2021). Depression, anxiety, and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic: Comparison among higher education students in four countries in the Asia-Pacific region. *Journal of Population and Social Studies*, 29, 370–383. <https://www.doi.org/10.25133/jpssv292021.023>.
- Marioni, G., van't Land, H., & Jensen, T. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on higher education around the world. International Association of Universities. [https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau\\_covid19\\_and\\_he\\_survey\\_report\\_final\\_may\\_2020.pdf](https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf).
- Rajaendram, R. (2021). International students slowly returning post-pandemic. The Star, Malaysia, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2021/11/07/international-students-slowly-returning-post-pandemic>.
- Razami, H. H., & Ibrahim, R. (2021). Distance education during COVID-19 pandemic: The perceptions and preference of university students in Malaysia towards online learning. *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications*, 12(4), 118-126. <https://www.doi.org/10.14569/IJACSA.2021.0120416>.
- Rindlisbacher, C. (2020). The 100 most popular courses during the pandemic, Class Central. <https://www.classcentral.com/report/coronavirus-most-popular-courses/>.
- Sia, J. K. M., & Abbas Adamu, A. (2021). Facing the unknown: pandemic and higher education in Malaysia. *Asian Education and Development Studies* 10(2), 263-275. <https://www.doi.org/10.1108/AEDS-05-2020-0114>.
- Sundarasan, S., Chinna, K., Kamaludin, K., Narunnabi, M., Baloch, G.M., Khoshaim, H. B., Hossain, S. F. A., & Sukayi, A. (2020). Psychological impact of COVID-19 and lockdown among university students in Malaysia: Implications and policy recommendations. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17(17), 1-13. <https://www.doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17176206>.
- The World Bank. (2021a). Realizing the future of L learning: From learning poverty to learning for everyone, everywhere, World Bank Group. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/realizing-future-of-learning-from-learning-poverty-to-learning-for-everyone-everywhere.print>.
- The World Bank. (2021b). Urgent, effective action required to quell the impact of COVID-19 on education worldwide, World Bank Group. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2021/01/22/urgent-effective-action-required-to-quell-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-worldwide>.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). (2021). Thinking higher and beyond: Perspectives on the futures of higher education to 2050. [https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Thinking-Higher-and-Beyond\\_EN-Format\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Thinking-Higher-and-Beyond_EN-Format_FINAL.pdf).

## Authors

**Meng Kui Hu**, Chartered Banker, MBA, is a former senior banker with 26 years of banking experience in commercial and corporate banking.



He is actively involved in various governmental agencies, providing his expertise in banking, financial technology, and best practices for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). He is presently a member of the United Nations ESCAP Sustainable Business Network (ESBN) and its Vice-Chair for the Digital Economy Task Force. He also serves as a member of the SME Expert Advisory Panel (SEAP) with SME Corp Malaysia; and the Examination Committee with the Asian Institute of Chartered Bankers (AICB). He earned his Master of Business Administration degree from the University of Strathclyde, UK, and has authored two books entitled “SME Challenges and Solutions” and “Transforming Family Businesses.” He also writes regularly on financing and business for various publications. He is currently a Ph.D. scholar with Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia.

**Daisy Mui Hung Kee, Ph.D., MBA**, is an associate professor at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, Malaysia. Her areas of interest are human resource management, organizational behavior, work values, leadership, psychosocial safety climate, entrepreneurship, and small and medium enterprises. She earned her Master of Business Administration degree from the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia, and her doctoral degree in business and management from the International Graduate School of Business of the University of South Australia. In 2006 she received the Merdeka Award from the Australia Malaysia Business Council of South Australia. She can be reached at [daisy@usm.my](mailto:daisy@usm.my).