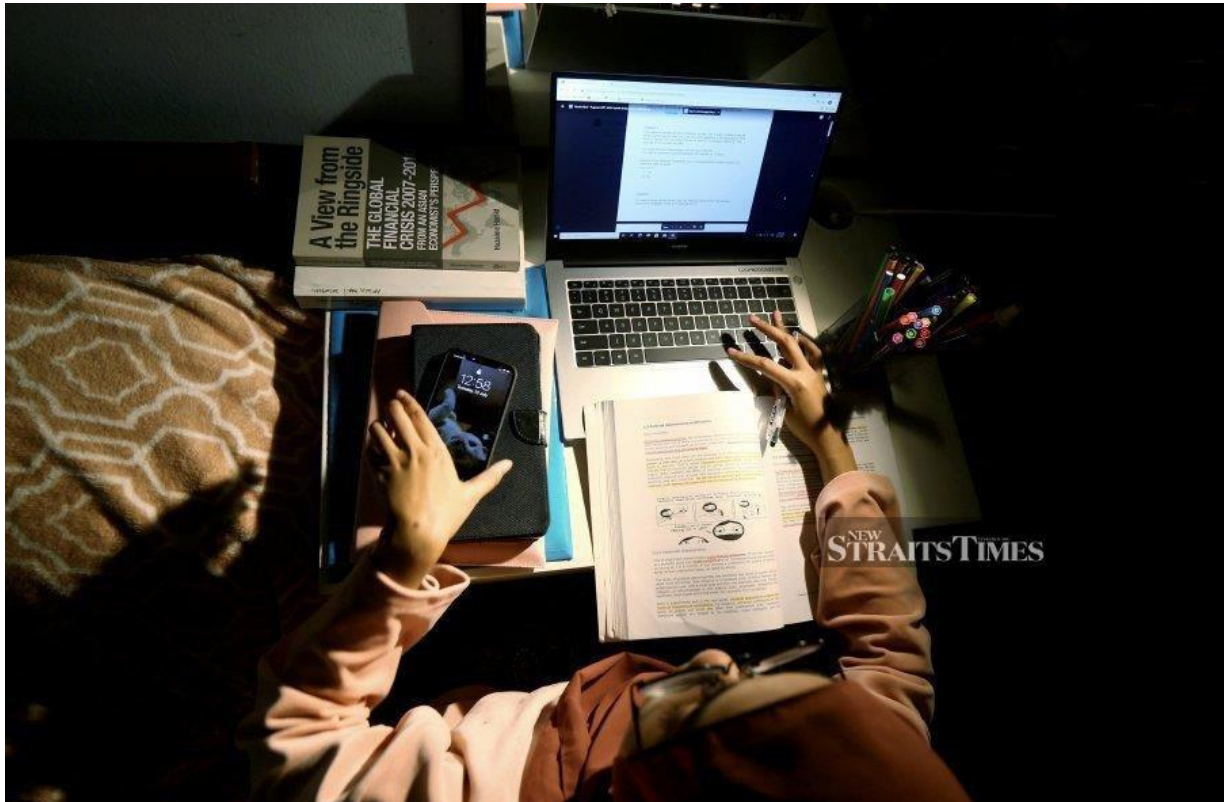


How pandemic has spurred digital transformation in higher education

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The smooth transition in Malaysian universities from physical to virtual classrooms was attributed to preexisting MOOC (massive open online courses) and blended learning policies (LMS) in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025. - NSTP file pic

LETTERS: The Covid-19 pandemic has become synonymous with international mobility restrictions.

There was a hiring freeze on international scholars and there were restrictions on local scholars travelling for international conferences, teaching and research.

Prominent host countries, like the United States, Canada, Australia, Britain, China, Japan, Singapore and Malaysia, witnessed a steep decline in enrolments.

This has significantly stalled the internationalisation agenda.

Nevertheless, I argue that the pandemic has equipped universities with digital competencies, humanistic mindsets and a determination to advance this agenda.

As Malaysia moved into the endemic stage, restorative strategies were put in place by the higher education system to sustain the internationalisation agenda.

The Education Ministry, along with academics, staff and students responded to this crisis in extraordinary ways.

A leader from an international branch campus in Malaysia remarked: "Malaysia adapted quickly. We just got on with it and did some really great work, whereas in the UK, they took a bit longer to adapt."

Teaching and learning migrated to digital platforms, curricula were digitised, web tools were employed, video conferencing platforms were brought in, and academics, students and staff were trained.

The smooth transition in Malaysian universities from physical to virtual classrooms was attributed to preexisting MOOC (massive open online courses) and blended learning policies (LMS) in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025.

The digitalisation of curricula and forced professional development of faculty, staff, and students for adopting technologies facilitated innovative ways of remote student engagement.

Now, Malaysia has a larger community of tech-savvy individuals who are open to strategic partnerships with foreign institutions to run joint programmes and/or pursue double degrees remotely and offer flexible learning programmes for international students.

This year, Malaysia's Internet penetration rate stands at 89.6 per cent, one of the highest in Southeast Asia.

This ease with technology replaced physical mobility with virtual mobility for international engagement, dialogues, and research with academics, scholars and experts around the world, which was not envisaged before.

Universities here offered free webinars, symposiums and lectures to bring together students and academics for the exchange of knowledge and ideas to enrich education and governance during the pandemic. WebEx reported a triple-digit percentage growth during the pandemic.

Connecting with the international community, experts, and renowned scientists is now just a call away.

In a bid to continue digitisation, the Education Ministry has allocated RM64.8 billion to "weather the pandemic".

We learnt that students and early career academics with limited funding can connect with the global academic community in less intimidating and expensive ways.

Guest lectures from experts in the field are now a common feature of regular classes.

Prof Johanna Waters at University College London mentions that "Covid-19 has rendered international students visible".

Universities established helplines to support international students' wellbeing and pre-mobility initiatives.

The Malaysian Society for Higher Education Policy & Research Development (PenDaPaT) organised several webinars and discourse series to address issues and challenges faced by international students and to gain insights for establishing remote international partnerships.

International offices and graduate schools, without much bureaucratic trouble, devised strategies to support international students complete their degrees by allowing remote doctoral supervision and viva voce (oral examination).

The pandemic has transformed how we deal with international students, scholars and academic partnerships. The underlying philosophy for internationalisation can now be more humanistic and relational, which promises meaningful alliances.

The swift reaction to the pandemic has transformed mindsets and attitudes in higher education, and resulted in competencies to engage with students and academics remotely but more meaningfully.

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