

Consider hybrid classes in varsities

March 1, 2023 @ 12:01am



A flexible study arrangement with Internet access and excellent facilities will be a boon for public universities. - NSTP file pic

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Khaled Nordin said the ministry was looking at ways to ease the burden of tertiary-level education by reducing the duration of study and changing the mode of learning.

As an academician teaching at a local public university, I would like to express some concerns.

For school leavers, being accepted to study at a university is like taking a small step into adulthood and a big step towards academic excellence.

Students often envision a campus life that is more than just attending classes, doing assignments and taking exams.

There are also extracurricular activities, campus events and living with friends that will help them build a solid resume.

They have to go through academic challenges and socially enriching experiences to prepare them for the real world.

So the initiative — to ease the burden of students by allowing them to study from home for two years before completing the rest of their studies on campus — requires research.

One issue to address is online learning, which must be improved.

During the Movement Control Order, the syllabus, which was designed for face-to-face learning, was adapted with minimum consideration given to the constraints and challenges, such as technicality of devices, Internet access, time, types of assessments and online teaching materials.

For studio-based programmes, for example, lecturers and students struggled with imbalances in digital competency, inefficiency of teaching or doing studio work at home, inadequate project materials and data collection for site analysis.

Language lecturers were not spared headaches too.

Many believed that teaching speaking and listening skills online was ineffective as assessment was limited to certain aspects.

For example, non-verbal communication, such as gestures and eye-contact, could not be observed via online presentation.

All these gnawing issues are part of the reality in universities today.

It is also true that there are many school leavers whose families cannot afford to send them for further studies.

I have some suggestions to prevent students from missing out from a significant developmental phase of their campus life:

FIRSTLY, improve the facilities in universities, especially public universities. The computers must be up to date and Internet connection must be optimised for online learning to be efficient.

Wi-fi access must be available on campus, including hostels. With excellent facilities and Internet access, hybrid classes can be conducted;

SECONDLY, instead of offering online classes to all students, perhaps universities can identify those who really cannot afford to study on campus.

Perhaps these students can opt for hybrid classes; and,

THIRDLY, identify subjects that are suitable for online learning, as opposed to lab or studio-based subjects, and offer them in a short semester.

Students can enrol for theory-based subjects or studies related to concept, history and facts that do not require them to come out with hands-on projects.

I hope the ministry think tanks responsible for reforming higher education will turn over every stone before introducing a flexible study arrangement.

A study involving the university administration, academicians and students will yield more accurate results.

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