

Chapter 1

Reimagining Higher Education in the Post–Pandemic World

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is often touted as a recession-proof occupation and industry. During a recession, jobs are lost, but people's hunger for higher education typically grows. The Covid-19 pandemic shattered this belief, particularly in the private higher education industry. The campus closures due to Covid-19 have led to a drastic decline in new student enrolment, increased student deferments while disrupting academic calendars and campus operations, with some universities and colleges likely to close down or merge. Institutions have had to pivot to online learning to try and maintain learning and business continuity. The pandemic accelerated digital adoption across the global higher education sector. For any recovery to be meaningful and sustainable, there must be reform. This chapter explores how higher education must transform in the new normal post Covid-19 pandemic. It implores university leaders to reimagine and adopt game changing strategies in curriculum design, assessment, and delivery in order to sustain and grow ahead of the market when the pandemic is over.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

“.....never let a good crisis go to waste”. – Winston Churchill

The lockdown due to Covid-19 has led to a deep economic dive. By June 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that the world GDP had fallen by 4.9% in 2020. Compared to 2009, which was one of the worst years of the global financial crisis the world GDP had dipped only 0.1% then. By July, advanced economies were expected to contract by 8% while emerging market economies were expected to shrink by 3% in 2020. The World Bank Report in June 2020 had estimated Malaysia's economy to contract by 3.1 percent in 2020. Employment opportunities and household incomes were negatively affected, with 2.4 million expected to lose jobs in 2020 in Malaysia. To save the economy and jobs, the

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Malaysian government implemented 6-9 months loan repayment moratorium and economic stimulus package worth RM250 billion.

IMF admitted that the impact of the pandemic will be devastating, far worse than the 1930's Great Depression. The damage so far has been severe, with global supply chains being seriously disrupted; global business confidence softened, and consumer confidence dented. Recovery is unlikely to be V-shaped. Economic recovery will depend heavily on when effective treatments and vaccines become widely and readily available. In addition, the *new normal* that required social distancing, reduced physical capacity forced businesses to shift activities online. This in turn accelerated the need for digital transformation across all businesses and life activities.

For the workforce, there was a rapid change to work-from-home (WFH) arrangements to adhere to regulations. The lockdown had imposed various forms of travel restrictions that caused extended isolation and lead to changes in social interaction patterns.

Almost all the schools, colleges and universities were closed during the lockdown, disrupting academic calendars and campus operations. Institutions have had to pivot to online learning to maintain learning and business continuity, with rapid adaptation and review of academic policies practices. Most conventional universities have had to scramble to move courses online. While some universities struggled to adapt to remote learning which resulted in unsatisfactory student experiences, many institutions adjusted well. As a result, the pandemic changed their students' perspective towards online learning as an accepted alternative way of learning. Regulatory and professional bodies too changed their perception towards online learning as a result of the pandemic.

While the pandemic is not going to reduce the demand for higher education, many students may likely defer their studies until borders re-open and it is deemed safe to return to campus. Almost all new international students deferred their study plans while local students adopted a 'wait and see' approach. In a QS Survey conducted in May 2020, 40% of international students intended to change their study plans abroad and explore alternative options locally or regionally. Private higher learning institutions have had to review their budgets to preserve cash in the face of drastic decrease in enrollment. Some universities and colleges will likely have to close down or merge as the decline in enrolments is predicted to persist until mid-2021.

LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A review of the events and consequent experiences during an entire semester lead to the following observations:

1. Developing university-wide capabilities to offer effective online learning and assessment has now become an essential capability for all universities in the future. This includes investments a robust virtual learning environment (VLE) that includes learning management systems, lecture capture systems, remote communication tools and applications, expanded hardware capabilities and interactive and engaging microsites for all courses.
2. Online professional development sessions for academics to support them in conducting fully on-line learning and assessment is a key success factor for academics and students to adapt quickly to campus closures and ensure learning continuity.

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