

Chapter 12

The Global Pandemic and Challenges for Tertiary Education in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The global pandemic and subsequent series of movement control orders (MCOs) imposed by the Malaysian government have severely impacted the tertiary education sector comprising both public and private universities in Malaysia. Private colleges and universities in Malaysia now face increased financial pressures as enrolments of students have either been cancelled outright or deferred. Whilst full-time employees in the tertiary education sector face additional pressures to handle these disruptions, contractual staff members face the risk of unemployment resulting from the non-renewal of their existing teaching contracts. Even if some of these classes can be moved online, challenges remain; for example, scientific research and classes that require physical access to laboratories for the conduct of experiments will be impacted.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally universities have been closed to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus disease (Covid-19) [Mirza, C. (2020); QS (2020); Plancher, K.D. et al. (2020); Krishnamurthy, S. (2020); Chertoff, J. et al. (2020); Hilburg, R. et al. (2020); Livari, N. et al. (2020); Stambough, J.B. et al. (2020); Upadhyaya, G.K. et al. (2020); White, E.M. et al. (2020); Balhareth, A. et al.(2020)] thus interrupting the process of learning for 1.6 billion learners making up 91% of the total worldwide student enrolment [ILO (2020); Li, C. & Lalani, F.(2020)]. In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO) was first imposed on the

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18th of March 2020 to prevent the transmission of Covid-19 [Choong, J. (2020); Choong, P.Y. (2020); Othman, M. (2020); Lim, I. (2020)]. Although the government subsequently eased the MCO by allowing most businesses to reopen from the 4th of May 2020, the higher education sector, which was already facing severe challenges even before the imposition of MCO remained closed [Choong, P.Y. (2020); Hunter, M. (2020); Abdullah, D. (2017); Kamal, S.M. (2017); Lim, I. (2017); Zainuddin, A. (2018)]. As a result, Malaysian universities that relied heavily on tuition fees for their revenue streams faced financial difficulties [Mirza, C. (2020); Hunter, M. (2020)]. This was also the trend globally [Tamrat, W. (2020)] due to financial difficulties faced by the students' sponsors themselves [Choong, J. (2020); Choong, P.Y. (2020)]. The situation was even direr for government-linked universities like UniKL Malaysia, whose enrolment is predominantly from low-income families [Xpress-Q2 (2017); Mara (2020)].

Most government-linked universities like UniKL Malaysia highlighted in this study were set up by the government to provide opportunities for students from rural areas to pursue tertiary education [Mara (2020)]. Nassr, R.M. et.al. (2020) explored the challenges faced by the students of UniKL Malaysia due to the lockdown. UniKL is a government-linked university that hosts many students coming from low-income families who are receiving sponsorships/loans from various government agencies. Likewise, studies by Stambough, J.B., et al. (2020) and Chick, R.C., et al. (2020) uncovered numerous issues encountered by students that must be tackled head-on by university administrators so that they can be avoided when facing similar situations in future.

The Covid-19 outbreak has impacted businesses and industries of different kinds and sizes, including the tertiary education sector. In the United Kingdom, university staff, especially contractual staff, have been abruptly dismissed to save costs [Guardian, (2020)]. Across the world, lectures and tutorials have had to be moved online swiftly, ongoing lab research halted, and new students' enrolment has been deferred or delayed. Almost all student exchange programmes, and academic conferences have had to be cancelled. Covid-19 has posed significant challenges for the tertiary education sector. This chapter discusses the impact of Covid-19 on the tertiary education sector in Malaysia.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The study aims to identify the problems and challenges brought upon the tertiary education sector in Malaysia by the Covid 19 pandemic. These include issues related to the financial impact arising from the drop in revenues from tuition fees, challenges with online teaching for both academics and administrators, assessment and proctoring hurdles when conducting final examinations in an online environment, and any potential impacts on the morale of both staff and students.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is to identify and highlight both problems and solutions so that the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia can draw the appropriate conclusions and take more proactive steps to remedy any issues before they arise. Because it seems that the pandemic is not about to go away anytime soon, and online education looks set to become the new normal.

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