

Reopening Schools: Giving Access to Education Equitably and Safely

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Introduction

For more than three months schools have been closed, beginning from the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020. The learning activity of around 4.9 million students in pre-school, primary, and secondary schools have been disrupted¹. While teachers are encouraged to conduct teaching via digital platforms², the reality is, most teachers, students and parents are not well-equipped to immediately adapt to this supposedly new norm.

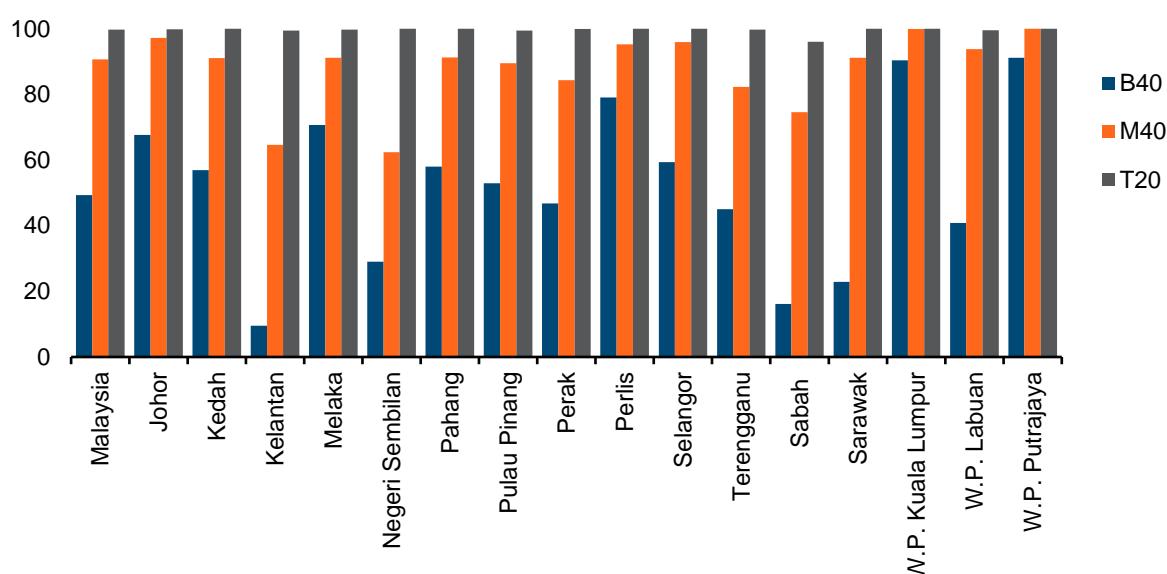
¹ Ministry of Education (MOE) (2019b)

² Khairah N. Karim (2020)

In fact, the majority of students do not have appropriate digital devices to learn digitally. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE), only 6 – 9% of students own a personal computer and/or a tablet³.

Quality internet coverage is another issue. Based on data from the Basic Amenities Survey 2016, only 49.3% of households in the bottom 40 (B40) income group have an internet subscription at home (Figure 1). This figure differs across states, with some states having a much lower percentage of households with internet subscription. For example, only 9.6% of the B40 households in Kelantan have an internet subscription.

Figure 1: Subscription of internet at home by household income group, 2016 (%)



Source: Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey Report 2016, Department of Statistics (DOS) (2017)

Based on the latest decision, the MOE has allowed schooling activities to resume on 24 June for students who will be taking major examinations this year, including Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), Sijil Vokasional Malaysia (SVM), Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM), Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (STAM) and international exams. However, for the vast majority of students, their schooling is still on hold.

Almost 3 million primary school students at all levels are still unable to go to school. This is in contrast with the strategy carried out in Denmark, France, and Germany that prioritises primary school reopening before secondary schools since young children have a lower learning autonomy, i.e. self-learning is not practical for them. Besides, social and educational inequalities begin at the early stage of children's education⁴. This is the stage where children should learn basic literacy and numeracy skills.

³ Harian Metro (2020)

⁴ Jourdan et al. (2020)

The decision to open up schools only for the examination takers reflects the entrenched examination-centric attitude towards education in Malaysia. This, however, is not entirely consistent with the aspirations underlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025⁵, which are:

- i. to ensure universal access to education,
- ii. to provide excellent quality education,
- iii. to narrow the urban-rural, socio-economic, and gender education achievement gaps,
- iv. to build unity, and
- v. to ensure every child is fully literate and numerate.

Under the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) that started on 7th June, many restrictions that were implemented during the initial phase of MCO have been relaxed⁶. These include allowing childcare services, most professional and skilled services, hairdressers and beauty salons, and museums, cultural centres and public libraries to operate. Public transportation is also allowed to run at full capacity. Protocols to ensure physical distancing have been outlined by the government and are to be complied by all parties.

Who are left behind due to the closure of schools?

Based on the 2017 data⁷, I estimate the number of students whose education is interrupted based on the latest decision by the government so far, where only Form 5 and Form 6 Upper students are allowed to go to school. The number of students presented is only those in the government or government-aided schools under the purview of MOE and does not include students in private schools and schools under different ministries such as Maktab Rendah Sains MARA (MRSM). The purpose of this exercise is not to give the exact figures on how many students will be affected, instead to illustrate the serious impact of school closures.

I also simulate a sub-scenario, where a percentage of those who are not able to go to school are able to continue learning digitally at home. To be able to do so, they would need to have both access to the internet at home and a laptop⁸. Data from the Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey 2017 is used. However, while a household may have a laptop, the laptop may belong to the parents who need to use it for work or be shared among siblings. Therefore, for a more realistic simulation, the percentage of households with a laptop is divided into half.

Based on the estimate, 4.2 million students, out of 4.7 million students in total (90%), would not be able to go to school. Of this, **3.3 million** (77% of those who cannot go to school) would not be able to effectively learn digitally from home. Unsurprisingly, fewer students in rural areas have digital access than students in urban areas (Figure 2).

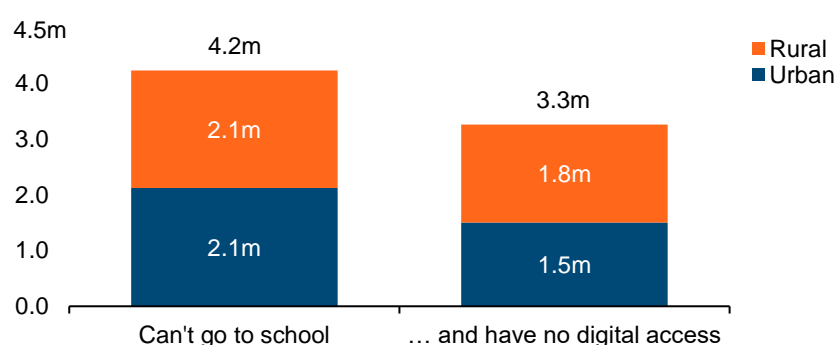
⁵ Ministry of Education (MOE) (n.d.)

⁶ Majlis Keselamatan Negara (2020)

⁷ 2017 data is the most recent publicly available data with sufficient granularity.

⁸ Any type of computer may be useful to carry out digital learning. However, the percentage of households with a laptop is more than double the percentage of households with a personal computer (PC).

Figure 2: Number of students who would miss out due to the closure of schools

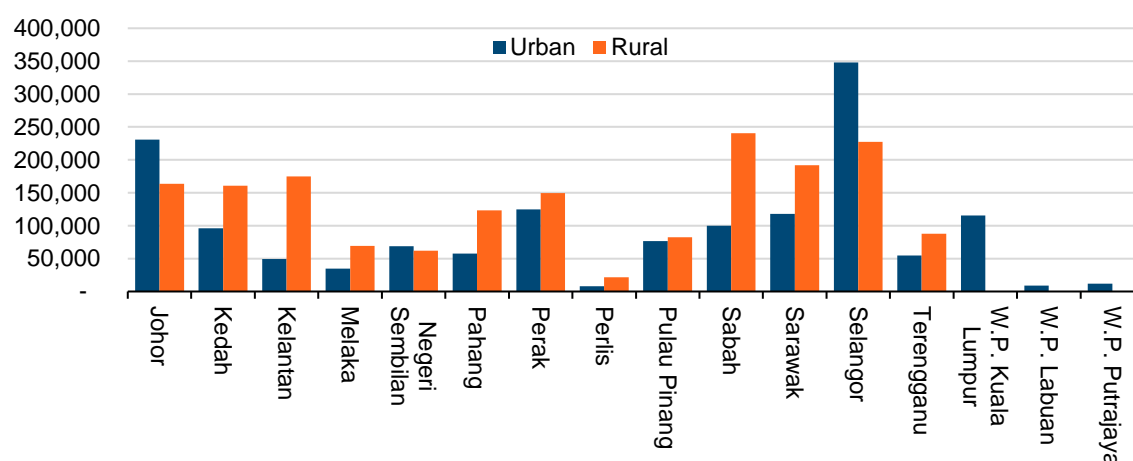


Note: The second column is a subset of the first column

Source: Author's estimate based on data from the Malaysia Educational Statistics 2017, Ministry of Education (MOE) (2019a)

Selangor, Johor, and Sabah are the states with the largest number of students whose education is totally inaccessible (Figure 3). In the case of Selangor, the state has the largest number of students in total as a share of the rest of the country, and therefore, even though the ownership of laptops in Selangor is rather high, a large number of students would still be left out.

Figure 3: Number of students who cannot go to school and have no digital access



Source: Author's estimate based on data from the Malaysia Educational Statistics 2017, Ministry of Education (MOE) (2019a)

In all states, laptop ownership in the rural area is lower than in urban area. Urban households are 1.5 times more likely to own a laptop than rural households. The gap is bigger in some states—the ratio in Sarawak and Kedah is around 2.

Not only that, based on the household income group, a significantly smaller proportion of B40 households have internet subscriptions at home compared to M40 and T20, as shown in Figure 1. Having no digital access while unable to go to school would worsen the inequalities across strata and income groups. With no access to quality education, upward social mobility for children from poor households would be very difficult⁹.

⁹ See Hawati Abdul Hamid and Jarud Romadan Khalidi (2020)

Consider reopening schools safely

Public health is the first and foremost priority during this time. Nonetheless, the government has to make sure that education is still accessible to all children. Given that digital learning in most cases is not viable, creative solutions are required. While many sectors have been allowed to operate for economic reasons, the education sector should not be at the bottom of the priority list. There is a moral duty to make sure our children are not deprived of education. They are the future of our nation.

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) in their 24 June 2020 press release reminded the government not to overlook children's rights to education. They also urged the MOE to explore other methods of teaching and learning in rural areas where internet and electricity are not available. SUHAKAM also suggested the government immediately reopen schools that have few students (*sekolah kurang murid*)¹⁰.

To quote the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General in his opening remarks at the Mission briefing on 12 March, "all countries must strike a fine balance between **protecting health, preventing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights**"¹¹.

In addition to the proposal by SUHAKAM for schools that have few students (*sekolah kurang murid*) to be reopened, for other schools, I suggest a hybrid approach where conventional face-to-face teaching and learning activities are carried out together with multimedia initiatives. Following are some considerations.

Rotation system

Schools where physical distancing can be carried out at full capacity should be reopened. However, for schools where this is not possible, I suggest two rotation strategy options below to limit the number of students in a school at one time:

1. **Weekly rotation** where half of the students (e.g. Standard 1 – 3 for primary school) are allowed to go to school in the first week and the other half of the student body (e.g. Standard 4 – 6) in the following week. Total days of contact (days in which students go to school) in a month, assuming a 4-week month, is 10.
2. **Two-day rotation** (six school days) where students are divided into three groups and each group attends school for two days a week. Total days of contact in a month, assuming a 24 school-days month, is 8. Proper scheduling is necessary to make sure teachers would still be able to get at least 2 days off in a week.

For the non-contact days (days in which students do not come to school), students should be supplied with self-learning materials, such as homework or reading materials, which they could complete while they are at home and preferably without needing internet access. Self-learning

¹⁰ Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) (2020)

¹¹ WHO Director-General (2020)

materials need to be properly planned and coordinated across different subjects to ensure that students are not overburdened, and the expectations are realistic for effective learning at home. The MOE should also consider an accelerated syllabus that focuses on core subjects.

Enhance physical distancing measures and Covid-19 awareness

Precautionary measures, as have been outlined by the government, should be diligently enforced and monitored. In fact, some measures could be enhanced. For example, packed food could be brought to classrooms instead of students going to the canteen. Students in classrooms should be monitored by teachers at all time, including during recess.

Wearing face masks should be highly encouraged. Schools should be supplied with face masks to make sure that all students have access to them, especially those from poor households and rural areas. In addition, soaps and sanitisers need to be placed around the school for everyone to use.

School time will be a good opportunity to educate students on the risk of Covid-19, the collective responsibility to curb its spread, the importance of physical distancing, the proper usage and disposal of face masks, the proper way of handwashing, and other related information, that they may also relay to their family members.

Step up multimedia learning initiatives

On top of rotational school attendance, multimedia learning initiatives should continue to support learning activity. For example, education programmes on TV and radio should be carried out systematically, with broadcasting schedule distributed to students. Widely used platforms such as YouTube and Facebook could be used to share on-demand education videos that are based on the Malaysian education syllabus.

Expand testing

Boarding schools, including MRSM that had 29,369 students (not including Form 5 students) in 2017, should be considered to be reopened in stages. For extra precaution, consider testing all boarding school students prior to resuming school to create a safe school bubble. In addition, students and teachers in high risk areas could also be tested.

Interventions where necessary

The classroom teacher could help monitor the progress of students and assist them in conducting their learning, and where necessary carry out interventions (e.g. providing extra class for underprivileged students who are left behind).

Covid-19 also brings a set of additional issues to some households that would take a toll on the emotional and mental health of some students. For example, confinement may lead to an increase in family conflict and domestic violence, some families may face economic hardship due to loss of employment, and some houses may be too cramped and inconvenient for learning. The role of teachers, school counsellors and administrators to identify these issues at the individual level and help students deal with them is very crucial to ensure no one is left behind. This could hardly be done virtually; physical interaction is necessary and thus schools need to reopen.

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