

Considerations in the Reopening of Higher Education Institutions

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Introduction

On 8 July, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) announced the full reopening of higher education institutions by October¹. Higher education institutions are given the flexibility to determine the mode of reopening.

Malaysia has recorded single-digit new cases in most days for the past two weeks. Under the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), many economic and social activities have been allowed to operate. Considering the inaccessibility of online learning to some students and the inability to carry out laboratory sessions for certain courses, the reopening of higher education institutions seems to be necessary and timely.

¹ Astro Awani (2020)

The chronology

Due to the complex nature of the pandemic, policies continuously changed, and adaptation has been challenging. Before the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) beginning 18 May, two public universities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) have already conducted online learning completely to curb the spread of Covid-19².

When the MCO started, online learning became the only option for all higher education institutions. However, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in its FAQ published on the first day of MCO acknowledged that some students do not have access to internet. Therefore, online courses in which these students would be affected were not allowed³. Unfortunately, institutions were left with no choice other than online learning.

Meanwhile, when the MCO was announced, students, including foreign students were encouraged to return to their hometowns⁴. However, just before the MCO came into force, students on campus were asked to stay put⁵. Students were then allowed to go home beginning 27 April, during the third phase of MCO⁶.

Most public universities have adjusted their academic calendar to include the long break in March due to the MCO. For most programmes, the ongoing semester (Semester 2 2019/2020) will be over by the end of August and the next semester (Semester 1 2020/2021) will start in October⁷.

Beginning 17 May, postgraduate research students were allowed to resume their academic activities on campus⁸. On 27 May, the MOHE announced that all teaching and learning programmes, except for final year, incoming first year, and postgraduate research students, will be conducted online till the end of 2020⁹. Consequently, during the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) that started on 10 June, institutions have allowed their students to take home their personal belongings from campus¹⁰.

When the National Security Council (NSC) indicated on the 1st of July that the MOHE will announce the date for the reopening of higher education institutions¹¹, there were mixed responses. While some students are eager to go back to campus, some expressed frustrations on the inconsistent decision as they have terminated their off campus rental contract or spent travel cost to return home¹².

² Teoh (2020)

³ Berita Harian (2020) & Fauzi Suhaimi (2020)

⁴ Radzi Razak (2020)

⁵ Berita Harian (2020) & Palansamy (2020)

⁶ Mohd Anwar Patho Rohman and Suzalina Halid (2020)

⁷ See Table 3 in the Appendix for the academic dates of most programmes in selected public universities.

⁸ Bernama (2020)

⁹ Esther Landau (2020)

¹⁰ Ainulniza Mohd Yusof (2020) & Norzamira Che Noh (2020)

¹¹ Zanariah Abd Mutalib and Mahani Ishak *ibid.*

¹² Khairil Anwar Mohd Amin (2020)

Considerations in the reopening

Inclusivity has to be the guiding principle for higher education institutions and the government in deciding the form of the reopening. For example, full online learning put underprivileged students with no digital access at a disadvantage. However, physical class may risk the health of vulnerable students such as those with pre-existing medical conditions. Furthermore, other issues that disproportionately impact certain students (e.g. poor households and foreign students) should also be considered.

Several concerns as listed in Table 1, which partly the result of past decisions need to be addressed.

Table 1: Concerns related to the reopening of higher education institutions

No.	Concern	Details
1	Public health ¹³	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The standard operating procedure (SOP) to ensure the safety of students and staff from the spread of Covid-19 should be a priority.• Students and staffs also have a varying degree of health concerns that need to be addressed to some extent.• The SOP in the event of an infected case needs to be clear.
2	Accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some students have to rearrange their accommodation arrangement, especially those who stay off campus.
3	Travel cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some students who live far from campus and have travelled back home may face financial difficulty to return to campus.
4	International students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Depending on the status of Covid-19 in the home country of the international students and the decision by the Immigration Department, some international students may not be able to return to campus.

In addition, policy related to the reopening has to be simple and clear for all students while still accommodating special cases. Effective communication is also important to avoid confusion. Where appropriate, some form of assistance should be considered for certain groups of students.

Proposed measures in the reopening

In my view, for policy clarity, physical classes should be expected by default when campuses fully reopen. If students are unable to attend classes with reasons such as being under quarantine, have underlying health issues or taking care of a vulnerable family member, they should be able to do online learning with resources made available to them as much as possible.

Nevertheless, lecturers could decide if they want to conduct their class (that does not involve laboratory work) online with the condition that *all* students enrolled in the class can and want to access their class digitally—an inclusive and documented process to check this should be carried out, for example by asking students to email their preference individually to the lecturer. Otherwise, lecturers may conduct their class physically with the option of online learning.

To address concerns listed in Table 1, several proposed measures are outlined in Table 2.

¹³ To address the public health concern, insights from measures taken by higher education institutions in other countries (summarised in Table 4 in the Appendix) are drawn.

Table 2: Proposed measures in the reopening of higher education institutions

No.	Measure	Details
1	Time allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students who stay on campus are to return to their residential colleges in stages (in 1 or 2 weeks before the semester starts) to avoid congestion. A grace period of at least 2 weeks from when the semester starts should be given to students who cannot attend compulsory lectures or tutorials due to justified reasons such as being under quarantine.
2	Improve digital infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A special fund is allocated to ensure public institutions are well-equipped with a functional digital infrastructure to carry out online learning before reopening. Digital infrastructure includes both physical hardware such as camera and microphone in all lecture/tutorial rooms and online system such as learning management system (LMS) and lecture capture system (LCS). Lecturers should be trained to fully utilise digital infrastructure to ensure students who are unable to attend physical classes will still be able to access their lectures/tutorials. Manual administrative processes should turn fully digital. Tax incentive should be considered for private institutions to improve their digital infrastructure.
3	Limit classroom density	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical classes need to be conducted in rooms that allow physical distancing based on the number of students enrolled. For lectures that have a large number of enrolments such as first year courses, students are split into two rooms where live streaming is broadcasted in one of them.
4	Close contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a student needs to be quarantined at any point due to being in close contact with an infected person, online resources (e.g. lecture recordings) should be made available. The SOP to manage students who were in close contact with an infected person especially if they reside on campus needs to be properly established.
5	Accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Priority for residential colleges are given to students who need to be physically on campus more such as coursework students as opposed to non-laboratory research students, students who do not have laptops or internet access, and students who may face more difficulties in finding off campus accommodation such as first year and international students. Student Representative Councils are advised to help students who look for off campus accommodation.
6	Subsidy for travel cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To support students who have to travel from East to West Malaysia (and vice versa) to return to campus, consider providing subsidy for their flight ticket. Students would need to apply via their respective institution. For ease of administration, the subsidy could be in a form of a flat rate (e.g. RM300) deposited directly to students' account. The subsidy should not be on a reimbursement basis as this would require an out-of-pocket expense from students. Consider extending the subsidy to students from poor households even if they would not need to fly to return to campus.

7	Contact tracing system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MySejahtera contact tracing system to be implemented in every building. • Practical zone designation may also be considered to restrict movements. • Booking system for the use of facilities such as laboratory without supervision to manage physical distancing and contact tracing.
8	Subsidise testing and quarantine cost for international students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide testing and quarantine facility for international students with subsidised rate. • For foreign students who are unable to return to campus, for example because immigration reasons, the process to suspend their studies or postpone their registration (for incoming students) need to be made simple.
9	Proper communication channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions are required to establish a proper official communication system on multiple platforms (e.g. university email and official social media accounts) to avoid miscommunication. • Updates need to be communicated timely and clearly. • Two-level of communication systems are suggested: (i) university-wide communication, and (ii) faculty/department/residential college-level communication for specific issues. • All staff are briefed on the standard communication practice related to Covid-19 to avoid confusion as a result of conflicting messages disseminated individually.
10	Clear procedure in the event of an infected case	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government needs to establish and communicate a clear SOP in the event of an infected case to ensure appropriate response from institutions.
11	Events/ gatherings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SOPs for physical event or gathering on campus should be clearly established. • Institutions, however, are encouraged to continue carrying out events through online platform.

Concluding remarks

While we strive to ensure equal access to education for students from all walks of life in deciding to reopen campuses, now is also an opportune time for the higher education institutions to accelerate digital initiatives beyond Covid-19 with inclusivity as the core principle. For example, higher education institutions ought to think of how to make classes more accessible to disabled students, students with health issues, students who need to take care of a sick family member, students who need to observe a religious occasion, and so on. In addition, organising a knowledge sharing session with the online streaming option or in the form of a webinar is an inclusive approach that allows people who would otherwise unable to attend it physically (e.g. those who reside in other states) to join the session.

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Appendix

Table 3: Academic dates for most programmes in selected public universities

University	End of Semester 2 (2019/2020)	Start of Semester 1 (2020/2021)
Universiti Malaya	12 July 2020	12 October 2020
Universiti Putra Malaysia	9 August 2020	19 October 2020
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia	9 August 2020	12 October 2020
Universiti Sains Malaysia	23 August 2020	12 October 2020
Universiti Teknologi MARA	21 July 2020	12 October 2020

Sources: Universiti Malaya (2020), Universiti Putra Malaysia (2020), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (2020), Universiti Sains Malaysia (2020) & Universiti Teknologi MARA (2020)

Table 4: How do universities in other countries reopen?

Country	Details
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some university remains to implement remote learning, with exception of lab-based students. NUS students to return to campus in August/Sept, but preparation for this started in June. The campus is divided into zones to restrict movements. Meetings allowed, but <5 people.
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wuhan University allows students to return in batches but only final year students (Bachelor and Master's, then PhD). Non-final year PhD who require laboratories need special permission. Peking University allows final year students to return but on voluntary basis and in four batches. Students are provided with "anti-epidemic" packages, which contains medical masks, disinfectants and food.
South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Korea University permits physical classes since May, but on the condition that online classes are also conducted. Classes allowed only if total ≤30 people and class is big enough. Professor has the option to conduct all classes online throughout the semester.
South Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classes restricted to ≤50 people. Ministry guideline stated that students are to return in four phases: 1) final year students requiring clinical training, 2) 33% incl. all students requiring clinical training, postgrad requiring access to technical equipment, 3) 66% incl. students requiring work placement and first year undergrads, 4) 100% incl. international students.

Sources: National University of Singapore (NUS) (2020b), National University of Singapore (NUS) (2020a), Xinhua (2020), Saif et al. (2020), Seungyup (2020) & Makou (2020)