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# Staying on campus during MCO a strain on students

 By [Dr. Muhammad Faris Abdullah](#) - April 14, 2020 @ 5:39pm


Allowing local university students to return home must be done appropriately and systematically so that social distancing can be observed without compromise. – File pic

RESEARCH in the United Kingdom has found significant depression and significant anxiety have doubled after a Covid-19 lockdown was enforced in the country. A similar situation was also reported in Italy, leading the Italian government to launch a nationwide psychological support programme for those mentally affected by the lockdown. There is already emerging evidence the same thing is happening here.

At the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), data have shown a rising trend in students seeking counselling during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period. This involved cases of depression and anxiety due to various factors, including living in isolation, not being able to see their families, worry about their families' well-being, and concern on the impact of the lockdown on their study plans. As the MCO drags on, IIUM continues to provide dedicated counselling exclusively for IIUM students who may need emotional and psychological support.

IIUM has also implemented various projects and activities to fill up students' time and to soften the impact of MCO on the mental health of students, including getting them to volunteer in projects such as producing personal protective equipment for medical officers, developing medical devices for use in combatting Covid-19, online tazkirah and virtual hangouts.

There are good reasons to be concerned that prolonged isolation and separation from families will further adversely affect the mental health of students. Being away from families due to the MCO can also adversely affect parents and the family in general. It is not unexpected that parents



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would be worried about the well-being of children who are stranded on campus. Online or telephone communication is no substitute to having one's child at home.

Parents have expressed the same to the university time and again. Indeed, at IIUM, university authorities have been receiving telephone calls and queries from parents on whether they can come and fetch their children, assuming they have undergone the necessary quarantine period.

In this regard, it is rational to suggest that students who are still on university campuses be allowed to return home. Apart from the psychological viewpoint, other supporting arguments include the fact that many foreign students are allowed to return to places that have suffered higher Covid-19 death tolls compared to Malaysia.

That said, allowing local university students to return home must be done appropriately and systematically so that social distancing can be observed without compromise. Parents and students must exercise responsibilities and take sufficient precautionary measures to ensure that the journey home is safe and smooth.

For a start, universities can request that students administer self-check routines several days prior to departure to their home towns. Students will also have to register at university health centres or clinics for final screening before they are allowed to return home. Those who, for some reason, fail the self-check routine or the final screening at university clinics should remain in self-quarantine at the university's accommodations.

In addition, universities can prioritise students who are picked up by parents or relatives after obtaining the necessary travel permission. For students whose parents or relatives are unable to pick them up at campus, universities should arrange for chartered buses to transport students to major destinations (including local airports). From there, parents and students must prove that they have made arrangements for safe travel the last mile to their homes.

Other precautionary measures include disinfecting the chartered buses before boarding, and ensuring that students and bus drivers wear face masks and practice good hygiene. Students should bear the bus fares, although universities may opt to subsidise.

All these should be pre-planned and staggered to avoid overcrowding. A proper identification letter may need to be provided by universities

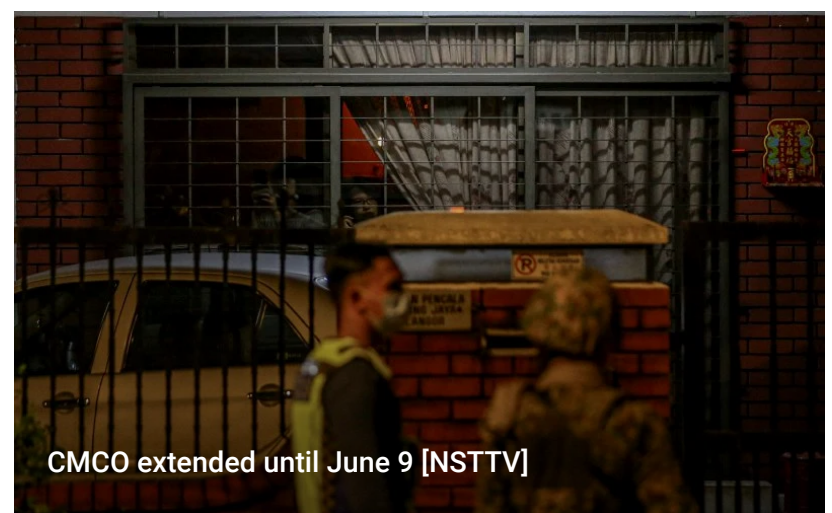
so that parents and students can identify themselves to the authorities at roadblocks. Universities must also continue to ensure the well-being of students who, for one reason or another, are unable to return home and have to remain on campus during the MCO period.

Finally, allowing students to return home during the MCO should not be seen as universities shirking their responsibilities of taking care of their students, but rather, an effort to minimise the impacts of the MCO, especially psychological ones, which are more difficult to manage over the long term.

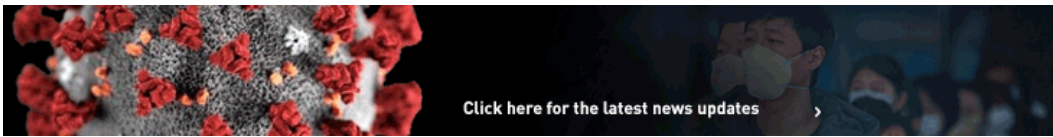
Undoubtedly, universities have gone the extra mile to ensure the welfare of students who stay on campus during the MCO period. But in times like this, students and parents would find greatest comfort if they can be at home. Home is where the heart is.

The writer is Director, Office for Strategy and Institutional Change, International Islamic University Malaysia

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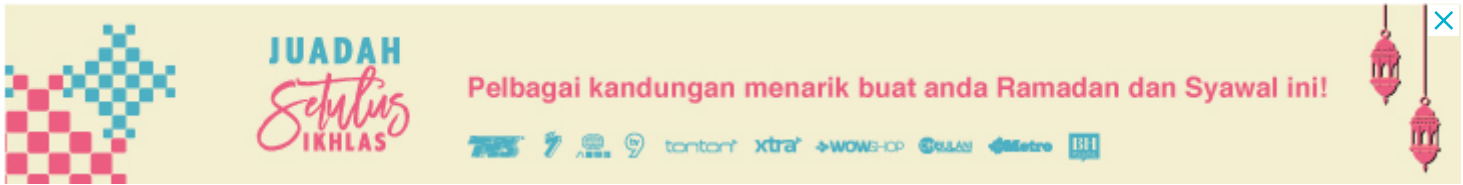
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