

No student must be left behind

MANY have hailed online learning as the panacea to disruptions to education and the new normal.

Online learning cannot stand alone but complements face-to-face learning to create the best educational experience for students and educators.

Our National Education Philosophy talks about educating students to become *insan sejahtera* through physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual development. Similarly, Unesco's Four Pillars of Education promotes learning to know, to do, to live together and learning to be.

While online learning will be able to address the delivery of intellectual content (learning to know) to students, the other aspects (pillars) would require effective face-to-face education where interaction between students and teachers, as well as between fellow students, takes place. This interaction is the major ingredient that develops students holistically.

Seasoned educators would agree that effective learning is not only dependent on content, but also on the way content is delivered, and the readiness of learners to learn. Online learning is not about putting offline

content online. One cannot simply send content and instructions to students through electronic means and claim that learning has taken place. Care must be given to ensure that learning online does not deny students of quality education.

When deliberating on the feasibility of online learning, most look only as far as students' access to devices and internet connection. However, students must also be mentally ready to engage online learning. For many of our students, online learning is a new experience and sufficient lead time is required to gradually get them into embracing online learning. Not knowing what to expect from online learning and what is expected of them, can put off students.

Similarly for educators. Rushing them into online learning will only result in substandard teaching. At university level, lecturers are employed because of their technical and professional competencies, not because of their pedagogical skills.

It is almost impossible for them to change their teaching methods overnight and retain the same level of instructional quality. Sufficient training must be provided to lecturers before

university-wide online learning is implemented. Again, lead time is important.

Any mode of education, online or face-to-face, must have quality, be equal and do justice for all students.

Khazanah Research Institute highlighted that 37% of Malaysian schoolchildren lack the devices required for online learning. Yet, teachers are instructed to continue with online learning at schools during this pandemic.

Similarly, some public universities have also embarked on full-scale online learning, claiming that they have managed to offer online courses to almost 90% of their students. The question is, what happens to the remaining 10%?

Universities have to be concerned about students who are unable to follow online lessons due to not having devices, internet access, and lack of learning space at home. These students will usually be from less fortunate families and students with special needs.

To deprive them of education while other students are following online lessons is a double whammy. In the spirit of "leaving no one behind", these underprivileged students

should be brought back to the campus where they can use their university's facilities to follow online lessons like their peers.

The pandemic has also helped many to realise that sit-in public examinations are not the ultimate assessment of students' competencies. The government has taken a bold step to scrap many public examinations at schools.

Educators have long argued that public examinations are not a true reflection of students' abilities. Students should be continuously assessed with a more comprehensive assessment method so that their true ability can be determined.

Every student has different strengths and weaknesses, and this is what education should focus on - to polish the strengths and to improve on the weaknesses, so that no one is left behind. This is the quality, equality and justice required from education.

**Assistant Professor Dr Muhammad Faris
Abdullah
Director
Office for Strategy and Institutional Change
International Islamic University Malaysia**