

Need to address digital divide

LETTERS

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THE Covid-19 outbreak has affected the lives of individuals in many different ways. United Nations secretary-general Antonio Guterres has called the pandemic the world's "greatest test since World War II". It has resulted in increased government control, shrinking economies – and booming technology.

Governments around the world have employed various methods to stop the spread of Covid-19, including imposing movement restriction orders, shutting down economies and enforcing strict social regulations. Malaysia, of course, has had different movement control order (MCO) phases beginning on March 18, with the latest being the recovery MCO, which is scheduled to end on Aug 31.

Since movements are restricted and social contact is discouraged, people have been increasingly utilising technology to connect and manage their daily lives remotely. Covid-19 is, in fact, pushing societies to embrace digitalisation. In the process, however, the problem of a digital divide in societies



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embraces the new normal during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The digitalisation of government services will enable them to be offered online, thus reducing the need for physical interaction.

However, in an online survey we conducted involving 738 respondents, there was less optimism about the government's capacity to digitalise its services. First, the digital divide is a concern, as 69% of respondents believe there is a disparity between urban and rural areas in the ability to access the Internet; and 76% agree that a digital divide exists between the rich and the poor.

Only half of the respondents agree that government agencies are currently well equipped to handle online transactions currently (52%) and less than half (41%) agree

that government servants are well trained to handle online transactions while, again, less than half (45%) believe that Malaysia has adequate IT infrastructure to handle large online transactions. Furthermore, only 30% of respondents agree that Malaysian government agencies are highly responsive through online platforms.

The respondents also think that Malaysia is not ready to implement online teaching and learning across all levels of education: Only 19.7% agree that Malaysia is ready for online teaching and learning for kindergartens, 25% for primary and secondary schools, and 30% for higher learning institutions.

The findings highlight the need for the digitalisation of government services to be given more attention, especially considering the ongoing pandemic and potential future crises. The government needs to focus on three areas of digitalisation: the digital divide, digital infrastructure and readiness of government agencies, and digital education.

The case of Veveonah Mosibin, a Sabahan university student who had to climb trees to get a stable Internet connection to take her final examination online, is not an isolated incident. Veveonah's problem illustrates the country's severe digital divide in terms of geography (rural and urban) and social class (rich and poor). Although Veveonah's issue has been addressed by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, there are many other Veveonahs all across Malaysia who do not receive similar attention from the government.

As for digital infrastructure and government agencies readiness, the public seems very divided on the issue. The lack of a proper digital structure and friendly digital platforms for the public also hampers the government's drive towards digitalisation. News of government agencies' websites crashing because of a high volume of traffic – the International Trade and Industry Ministry's, for instance – indicates the need to improve government agencies' digital infrastructure. Training and facilities should be given to government agency staff to ensure that they are able to cope with the digitalisation process. Further efforts, including a change of mindset among civil servants, are necessary to increase the efficiency of government agencies' online response in ensuring the smooth implementation of e-government services.

The digitalisation of education also needs to be prioritised, as it involves the lives of future generations.

We believe that by addressing the issue of the digital divide and focusing on developing the required digital infrastructure, digital education will facilitate both educators and students in adapting to the new



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