Online education? Think again

By Prof Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak - 03 MAY 2020 / 21:02 H.

Prof Sir Tim O'Shea, the former vice-chancellor of Edinburgh University, a leading expert on computer-based learning, is quoted as saying only "around 20 universities are in a good position to provide a range of high-quality online courses by the start of the new academic year in September." Some of the UK's top-ranked Russell Group institutions, including Oxford and Cambridge, were not in that category, he added.

In the UK Guardian last week (April 25), O'Shea divided the universities into four categories: (a) those with the capacity and will to develop high-quality online education, including the Open University, King's College London, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Leeds and Coventry; (b) those with the capacity but not the will, such as Oxford and Cambridge; (c) those with the will but not the capacity, such as Durham; and (d) those with neither the will nor the capacity, such as art schools and music conservatoires.

Using a similar classification locally, one wonders which of the four categories that our universities fit best with respect to delivering "high-quality online education". To insist that all go online is to imply that they belong to the first category. It cannot be true when only a handful among the UK universities are named to fit those categories. Something must therefore be gravely amiss on those decisions.

For those universities that thumped their chest in claiming that they are "ready" may now have to come clean by declaring that they do not have both the will (perhaps) and capacity (including financial) to launch such high-quality initiatives. Otherwise, they would want to clarify their positions so that they are not seen as negligent in their due diligence at the expense of public interest.

A report from the University and College Union (UCU) in the UK, forecasts that the sector could lose around £2.5 billion next year, if the pandemic continues. This costs will add to the financial pressures already facing universities. The same can be said about Malaysian universities that are already struggling financially long before the Covid tragedy.

To top this, Aris Katzourakis, co-president of the UCU branch at Oxford University, highlighted the issue of replicating laboratory classes online. The zoology professor noted that "these elements will not be taught to students to the same level". Or for practical and hands-on learning of other non-science courses like architecture without compromising quality. Indeed, to prepare and deliver new online courses, experts contend that it would need between 12 and 18 months to do so.

Over and above this concern, it is a well-known fact not all students are privileged in the same way to experience life, thus benefiting from education. Such disparities – no matter how small – can be wide enough to disrupt fairness, justice or equity, and finally jeopardise quality as the desired outcome of "education".

This does not reflect the notion of no one is left behind; questioning the very decision to blindly promote online learning as the panacea to a fair, equitable and of high quality overall. Without doubt, it is time to think again!