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Higher education must not be put under the same movement restrictions



By **Dzulkifli Abdul Razak** - October 20, 2020 @ 12:00am



Under the circumstances, (higher) education, as a system dedicated to knowledge, should be encouraged to resume the processes that have been displaced or halted. - NSTP/File pic

The reimposition of the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) on several states, especially in Selangor, has alarmed the state's learning institutions, from universities to research-based outfits said to be affected by a one-size-fits-all ruling.

Namely, campuses must be locked down and all classes must be conducted online. It is not the best solution under the circumstances, but complaints have fallen on deaf ears.

Policymaking authorities believe the issue can be mitigated, if not conducted optimally, by the use of technology alone.

This is a false assumption that has been proven several times and must be deconstructed, especially when dealing with higher-level courses that call for human interactions and skill enhancement that cannot be satisfactorily attained virtually.

So, the Internet abounds with grouses related to post-graduate studies, be they the intensively interactive-type, what is more, those who need specialised equipment and machines as per laboratories.

Not forgetting action research that requires fieldwork and the like. In other words, there must be room for human interactions before education can be effectively conveyed and meaningfully understood.

Research and development are the means to generate new knowledge for society to improve and prosper, as shown by the pandemic. They have allowed us to keep the virus at bay.

In summary, this is not a seasonal thing. It is ongoing because of the nature of research, seeking to understand life-like events and propose a possible solution to make life better. Generally, it cannot be subjected to an on-off system as per the MCOs.

It is because of this that researchers feel their efforts have been hampered.

In the long run, the research could be rendered useless, meaning time, effort and resources go down the drain while these are high in demand given the pandemic onslaught.

What is more baffling, however, are the contradictions that allow most businesses and shopping malls to open for business.

In other words, no lockdown and the large numbers who seem to be window shopping at the same time.

This is why there is no MCO nationwide, so that business (read, economic interest of the conglomerates) can thrive. Never mind about the petty traders who are severely affected by the CMCO. But I digress.

Arguably, research activities are economic activities too, though geared more to the knowledge economy.

Research is future-oriented and highly-skilled as well as deep-pocketed too. Therefore, it cannot be put on hold by the same rule of thumb that governs a school or undergraduate education.

This understanding seems to be sorely missing in articulating what higher education is all about.

This writer has been subjected to brickbats in proposing an option for an in-person MBA interactive course involving fewer than 10 highly intelligent working adults who prefer to come to the campus while following the standard operating procedures.

Maybe no one would even argue if the same course is done in a mall over a three-hour dinner, for example.

So why the double-standard? Why is higher-level education being lumped under the same rules that govern education in general? More surprisingly, why is no one attending to the needs of higher education at the policy level?

The last question is the most crucial in shaping education post-pandemic.

The numbing of minds is the most toxic result, affecting the education ecosystem for at least four decades.

It is not just the academics, but also the administrators and management.

This pandemic has reared its head far too often in many ways. But we do not yet have the courage to change for the better.

Under the circumstances, (higher) education, as a system dedicated to knowledge, should be encouraged to resume the processes that have been displaced or halted.

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