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Online education based on hi-tech approaches is easier said than done. There are other impacts that are yet to be fully comprehended, namely mental health.

Some contend that it could be the next pandemic that insidiously spreads among the unsuspecting population worldwide.



To control the situation without harming education, it is necessary to look for unconventional hybrid educational methods to broaden students' participation while keeping them safe and enhancing their learning abilities.

Here is where off-campus, or more generally, distance education, can provide unique and relevant learning approaches in a challenging education environment by complementing (if not substituting) the existing delivery system of quality education.

Various approaches in community-oriented and off-campus community-based education have been adopted around the world, and they can be as effective as an on-campus equivalent.

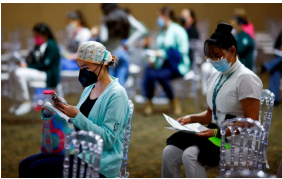
One example can be found in the early days of the establishment of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It is a successful pioneer programme that has been running for 50 years by providing alternative opportunities to thousands of Malaysians who were deprived of formal education due to unfortunate reasons.

USM introduced the *Pendidikan Jarak Jauh* (distance learning, or PJJ) programme for working adults with the core values of justice, fairness and access to make education a leveller of society, and not revenue-generation that is plaguing the education sector.

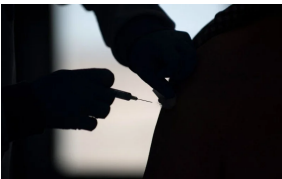
It grew in popularity because it was accessible, available, affordable and remained true to the "real" purpose of education as a public good. In order to meet the noble aim of establishing a balanced and harmonious community, clear, quality and inclusive learning outcomes are needed.

For this purpose, the USM PJJ programme was designed to be broad, and graduating time can go past the normal period of four years depending on the circumstances of the learners. The fee structure too was flexible and

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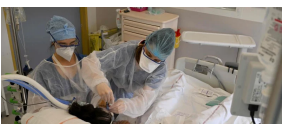
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underprivileged.

The eligible age was also broadened to enable working adults to enrol while continuing their careers. The USM PJJ was emulated by many, and eventually lent support to the country's sole Open University through a consortium. This project was an extension of the PJJ initiative and millions of Malaysians have benefitted.

In other words, collectively, the PJJ programmes were effective channels of quality education. They are instrumental in allowing practitioners to pursue a better future, post-pandemic.

In the context of the pandemic, where the constraints are not only associated with "safety" but equally "economics", like the early days of PJJ, this makes the mode of education even more relevant.

In one sense, their existence does help to close the gap of the uneven technology distribution, where PJJ is more widespread and participative.

Imagine if these programmes never existed or for some reason closed down, it will be a setback to the larger objective of universal education for all.

It is always easier to dispense with something, rather than to grow it, like the case of USM PJJ, the brainchild of the first vice-chancellor, Professor Hamzah Sendut, five decades ago.

I was confronted with the challenge of closing down the USM PJJ when I was vice-chancellor. However, the prevailing thinking on campus was that it was what USM was recognised for given its motto: "We Lead."

More so, as USM has done well in meeting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 for peace, and just and inclusive societies, the PJJ programme should be leveraged to the next level in promoting education beyond SDG 16.

The writer, an NST columnist for more than 20 years, is International Islamic University Malaysia rector

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