

EMERGENCY REMOTE LEARNING DURING COVID-19: SILVER LININGS FOR MALYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted education in over 150 countries and affected 1.6 billion students worldwide (Twin Reports, 2021). The initial wave of the pandemic saw many countries resorted to remote learning as an emergency response to the crisis, giving rise to emergency remote learning (ERL). Akin to online learning, ERL is education that takes place over the internet and not in the traditional classroom. However, the two are dissimilar in terms of pedagogical methods. According to Aguilera-Hermida (2020), ERL requires “a creative and flexible emergent response to the particular crisis...(and) more reflection and communication than any of the previous educational experiences” (p. 7). Another feature of ERL is that since it is unplanned, it has no recourse but to employ any kind of offline and/or online resources that are readily available (Bond et al., 2021). Conversely, online learning or e-learning is just one type of distance learning and is built over time to support students.

The focus of this article is on the possible good that emanates from the ERL experience of the Malaysian higher education sector. As we emerge from the pandemic crisis, knowledge of this topic can inform higher education efforts to build back better by contextualizing the “What’s next?” question. The key lessons learnt from ERL during the pandemic may potentially affect the direction and management of higher education in the long-run.

1. Offers unique opportunity to redefine the traditional model of campus-based learning

Prior to the pandemic, Malaysian university students’ learning was largely characterized by the traditional model of campus-based (face-to-face) learning. It is hence not surprising that when the pandemic hit, the early phases of ERL were fraught with numerous challenges for the university community who had little or no preparation at all for the digital shift in teaching and learning practices. Most of the initial hiccups were eventually ironed out along the way and Malaysian universities picked up important lessons from the ERL experience.

Students reportedly enjoyed the live streams of learning with peers and instructor which opened up the opportunity for them to participate in live discussions for real-time clarification (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Law, 2021). Students also found the online resources well-developed/organized and beneficial (e.g., Law, 2021; Loi & Ang, 2022) as they could revisit these e-materials and pace their own learning (Loi & Ang, 2022).

Contrarily, a study by Adnan and Anwar (2020) revealed that students tend to have poor online learning experience when there is a lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and instructors and when instructors take longer time to respond to their queries. Pickering and Swinnerton (2019) similarly contend that online learning is less effective than face-to-face instruction, more so when online courses are poorly designed and executed using inappropriate pedagogy (Woodworth et al., 2015). These findings seem to suggest that the old model of “personal” classroom is still not over and done with yet, hence presenting a unique opportunity to the higher education sector to reimagine or rethink the traditional model of campus-based learning. But what kind of model does the ERL experience advocate? Malaysian HEIs should perhaps envision a new online learning model that encompasses both forms of synchronous (live interaction) and asynchronous (self-paced) learning. One important consideration for this new integrated model is that it should be made more sustainable and healthy (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021).

2. Creates an ecosystem of collaboration

Cooperation between relevant agencies and faculties in response to university teachers’ and students’ needs during the pandemic via a wide range of initiatives and resources was unprecedented. The earlier collaborative efforts focused predominantly on disaster mitigation strategies but later more emphasis was given to planning, implementing and monitoring compliance, performance, and teaching and learning processes.

One of Universiti Sains Malaysia’s (USM) top priorities during the crisis was to maintain the university community’s safety and resilience while not compromising on compliance and teaching and learning expectations/quality (Ahmad Firdaus & Ahmad Farhan, 2021). The USM Covid-19 Nerve Centre was thus established to serve as a control centre in monitoring, responding, and coordinating all related stakeholders on COVID-19-related concerns and the institution (Ahmad Firdaus & Ahmad Farhan, 2021). Moreover, the Centre for Development of Academic Excellence (CDAE) collaborated with the faculties to support teaching staff’s technology competencies. The ERL experience also offers a hybrid of opportunities for collaboration among university teachers in co-creating online courses/videos and assessments, sharing resources, and conducting research.

3. Demonstrates the necessity for the provision of remote learning tools and skills for university teachers and students

As HEIs return to the new normal, the ERL experience holds important implications of instructional pedagogy approach and appropriate integration of technological tools to ensure the continuous success in delivering learning contents. Specifically, university teachers should have access to ample opportunities to develop their technical and pedagogical competencies needed for teaching remotely. Also, HEIs should prioritise strategies that provide the appropriate tools for university teachers and students alike. The main aim is to help the former in effectively conducting online classes and the latter in reaping the full benefits of remote learning. A study by Jowati (2020) reported that university teachers did not know the differences between ERL and online teaching but generally assumed that both are of the same pedagogical approach. Jowati (2020) also found that university teachers possessed limited knowledge and understanding of the many platforms and applications for online learning and how and when these options work best. In some studies (e.g., Law, 2021; Loi & Ang, 2022), Malaysian university students reported lack of tools and adaptive technology skills essential for online learning. Therefore, the student population should be afforded the same opportunities to equip themselves with the necessary tools and skills for online learning.

4. Highlights technology availability as a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective teaching and learning

The availability of technology is an essential condition but is not the overarching factor for effective teaching and learning. The Twin Reports (2021) published by the World Bank cited this as one of the key lessons learnt from the Covid-19 crisis. This article concurs that leveraging technology to exploit the hybrid space of education is limitless, and there is appropriate pedagogy which will increase the online learning effectiveness and/or the learning experience among students. Lamentably, the technology-led shift cannot ensure everything can be fully appreciated or replicated in virtual settings. A case in point is the difficulty of cultivating a sense of community, establishing personal bonding and building rapport as most teachers and students hardly connect with each other during and after an online class. It follows that university teachers have to be selective about the options which work best for their class and hence should not be overly dependent on technology. It cannot be emphasised enough that education experience is not just about learning the material but also about fostering good relationships and engaging in meaningful exchanges which all make for rich educational and social experiences.

5. Changes students' perceptions and attitude towards online learning

There were undoubtedly many nagging issues at the early phases of ERL but as university students immersed themselves more and more in this new mode of learning, their perceptions and attitude towards online learning significantly improved (Law, 2021; Loi & Ang, 2022).

Specifically, students were generally satisfied with the online learning materials, online assessments, communications and online tools used, but to a lesser extent the technical support provided for them particularly in relation to internet accessibility (Loi & Ang, 2022; cf. Norzaini & Doria, 2021). When there is poor internet connection, students are unable to be involved in active learning (UNESCO, 2020; cited in Norzaini & Doria, 2021). Therefore, there is a need for HEIs to upgrade their existing learning management system and internet connectivity.

6. Accentuates the importance of support for university teachers and students

Another key lesson that ERL has taught us is that remote learning strategies cannot be simply limited to only a supply of lessons and contents. Otherwise, students will struggle to remain focused, motivated and committed. Furthermore, students' study habits and learning skills have to change when they move from in-person class to online class which is in itself a stressful transition. A university-wide survey conducted by USM revealed that students faced numerous challenges during ERL. The first category of challenges relates to facilities or technology namely the unreliability of internet connections, financial burden for internet quota and lack of electronic devices or facilities at home (Ahmad Firdaus & Ahmad Farhan, 2021). The second is concerned with individual factors that comprise students' difficulties in adapting to a less conducive learning environment at home, intensified online communication and increased stress levels. These findings confirmed those of several studies (e.g., Al-Kumaim et al., 2021; Loi & Ang, 2022) carried out in other Malaysian universities. For instance, Al-Kumaim et al. (2021) reported that students' ERL experience is mainly characterized by work and information overload, inadaptability and unfamiliarity with the new remote learning environment and increased stress and anxiety.

Remote learning similarly poses a host of technological, pedagogical and social challenges for university teachers as revealed by other studies (e.g., Ferri et al., 2020). The technological challenges facing teachers principally mirror those of students which were mentioned earlier. The pedagogical challenges are mainly related to the lack of digital skills and social and cognitive presence (the ability to construct meaning through sustained communication within a community of inquiry). Finally, the social challenges are principally associated with the lack of human interaction (with students as well as with other faculty members) (Ferri et al., 2020) and the blurring of work and life boundaries, resulting in stress, anxiety and burnout.

To ensure both continuity of teaching and learning and protection of university teachers' and students' well-being, a comprehensive strategy should essentially include technical support as well as socioemotional monitoring and psychosocial support. An important policy implication at HEIs and national levels is that university teachers and students should have access to the right type of support which is crucial for their well-being and avoidance of burnout among university teachers and students.

7. Augments the critical role of university teachers and face-to-face interaction

Technology advocates may argue that the move to online learning is the best path forward and possibly the permanent solution to HEIs' problems. Yet, the global pandemic and the ERL experience have given the university community the opportunity to contemplate how verifiable this notion is. In an informal discussion conducted in USM, students recounted their educational experience during the lockdowns with the majority concurring that they now appreciate the physical space and face-to-face interactions they have had with their peers and lecturers on campus. While not discounting their enhanced learning experience through ERL, they claimed to have encountered first-hand what it was like to be cut off from the much-needed physical connection. Many shuddered at the thought of 100% online learning becoming the new reality for HEIs. These views are hardly surprising given that education is an intense human interaction endeavour that may be replicated but can never be completely replaced by online interaction. The ERL experience thus augments the critical role of university teachers and face-to-face interaction, inviting HEIs to rethink how we can reinstate the face-to-face experience just as HEIs start to move online.

Final thoughts

The silver linings of the ERL experience for Malaysian higher education can guide HEIs chart their after-pandemic course, build back better and remain resilient in going forward. This essentially means envisioning a new integrated model for the future teaching and learning experience. Definitely not a model which just has computers and laptops at the forefront; rather one that "marries the best of both worlds" comprising the old model of classroom (i.e., face-to-face education) and the digitalised platforms. This new model transcends the hybrid learning model in that it is more active, sustainable and healthy for the university community.

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Note: An abridged version of this article was published in Borneo Post, May 5, 2022.

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