

Covid-19: Learning Loss

Covid-19 and how it affects the education system worldwide

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted all levels of the education system, from pre-kindergarten to tertiary education worldwide. The immediate response of the education sector to the pandemic is shifting the traditional teaching and learning via the online platform. Only through online learning, the education sector continues to supply a high quality education service while maintaining minimal contact. However, despite the differences in teaching styles and standards of instructors worldwide, most agree that computers have no match for a physical face-to-face class. Hence, it is sensible to worry about academic setbacks during the pandemic. UNESCO (2021) reported that the closure of the educational institutions impacted about 94% of the world's student population. In addition, online learning exacerbated the pre-existing education inequality, especially students from low-income families (less privilege in terms of computing and internet access), disadvantaging girls, learners with disabilities, and other marginalised groups (USAID, 2021).

Learning loss due to the online teaching

“Learning loss” is used in describing the decline in student knowledge and skills. The learning loss occurs when education progress does not follow the same rate as it historically has compared to previous years (Pier et al., 2021). McKinsey's survey findings (2021) stated that students worldwide had paid a heavy price in a learning loss. The survey's respondents consist of 700 tertiary institutions students and 75 higher education leaders from various countries around the globe. 85% of the students felt learning loss throughout the online learning phase, where, according to their answers, the loss is between 40% and 60%. However, based on the university leaders, the learning loss is estimated between 30% and 45%. Online learning induced mental health problems among young people, hence, indirectly contributes to the learning loss.

What factors worsen the learning loss?

The most vulnerable students experience the steepest learning loss; the loss accumulated over time; and continued even after many students returned to physical class. The factors that contribute to the learning loss identified by the students are weak online learning, mental health, and longer lockdown (Lederman, 2021). The concerns related to weak online learning highlighted by students are; (i) distractions during online learning; (ii) hard time to find a suitable place to study and learn; (iii) being unmotivated to study due to the lack of positive engagement between the students and instructors; (iv) limited access to technology and internet connection; and (v) socially depressed learners.

Zooming in to the university students in Malaysia, Al-Kumaim et al. (2021) reported that 69.5% of students taking part in their research felt overloaded with online learning (i.e., workload and information), increased time spent on computer (i.e., 0.6% students spent more than 8 hours on computers before pandemic, and that has increased to 38.9% students during pandemic) and 67% students declared feeling stress while participating in online learning. The challenges faced by students act as constant stressor resulting in un conducive learning environment which exacerbates learning loss.

Dealing with student's learning loss

The lack of tools to gauge and measure the exact amount of student's learning loss makes it difficult for institutions to design a practical learning experience for the recovery phase. Furthermore, different groups of students experience different learning losses, adding complexity to the current situation. The Lederman (2021) podcast has highlighted several strategies in dealing with student's learning loss for the different groups:

First year students

First year students are newly registered students who do not have a proper or traditional high school closure, and their readiness for tertiary education is unknown. The secondary school or pre-university programme learners have a very different online learning experience compared to the higher

education learners. The online learning environment for higher educations utilises more tools and requires more engagement from the students. Therefore, it is crucial to prepare the first year students with fundamental digital literacy skills to ease communication and enhance expression of ideas. The university can help the students in developing their digital literacy by means of orientation process. One of the activities to train digital literacy suggested by Al-Kumaim et al. (2021) is to encourage the adoption of digital story telling because it motivates learning through the creation of personal stories. Thus, not only orientation is required, but the expectations of engaging, learning behaviours, knowledge, and digital skills have to be supplemented along as well.

Second year students

Second year students are the students who have started their tertiary education with online learning. Learning retention is vital for this group; thus, orientation related to their major is much needed. The purpose of the orientation is so that educators know how this group positions themselves in their role as a student and how they are thinking about their future career. Additionally, the orientation can help the institutions to reconnect and create a meaningful relationship with this group creating a better learning environment.

Graduates

Graduates experienced hybrid learning. They are the ones who had a taste of both learning experience, physical and virtual class. Institutions need to reconnect with the alumni as various lessons can be learnt from the alumni's hybrid learning experience. For example, the effectiveness of online learning compared to traditional learning and how online learning prepares the graduates for their professional careers.

The recommended strategies involved offer various types of orientation, which will increase the workload of faculty members. Therefore, institution leaders should start the recovery phase with consideration and think about combining multiple orientations in order to distribute the workload. Institutions should start considering students as their partners in identifying issues and finding practical and long-term solutions. Partnering with the students benefits both sides as it creates a better learning environment and pathway. Additionally, prerequisites to courses should be reconsidered, and although it can serve as gatekeeper or quality control, it can block students out. The focus of the recovery phase is to create policies that can lift the learning spirit within the students. Educators should start engaging a formative developmental assessment to ensure students move consistently through the learning pathway.

Conclusion

The role of university in addressing learning loss holistically is critical to ensure a continuous supply of high quality potential future workforce. The institutions need to acknowledge that students are people; they are not merely learning; they are learning despite everything that is happening around them. Institutions need to make learning relevant and send the message that the institution values and cares about humanity. Everyone should strive to cooperate in creating a supportive environment whether it's the learning process or the supporting services towards a learning process for the students. Members of the university, be it academics or non-academics are encouraged to handle the situations with flexibility and compassion to maintain a conducive learning environment regardless of the state of the global pandemic.

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