The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: A New Normal in Teaching and Learning at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Anthropology and Sociology Section

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Abstract The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered an incredible phenomenon globally, including Malaysia. It has a significant impact on all industries, including tertiary education, specifically the teaching, learning and evaluation of students. The Anthropology and Sociology section is no exception as educators strive to ensure that the outbreak does not affect the teaching and learning process and disrupts the curriculum that was planned before the outbreak. The pandemic has forced educators to embrace the new normal where online learning has become the main medium to deliver the curriculum. Although the online learning approach is not new, educators are required to fully rely on applications such as WebEx, Zoom, Microsoft Team as well as social media like WhatsApp and telegram to deliver their lesson and communicate with the students. This has created several challenges as online learning has become the mainstream tool during this crisis. Hence, the aim of this article is to discuss the implications of Covid-19 pandemic, specifically, the changes and modifications made to the teaching and learning facilitated by the lectures in the Anthropology and Sociology section of Universiti Sains Malaysia, as well as how to deal with this crisis.

Keywords COVID-19, Social Sciences, Anthropology & Sociology, Teaching, Learning

1. Introduction

On January 25, 2020, Malaysia was shaken by the first case of Covid-19. While the first few cases did not involve Malaysians, the situation fast escalated with the increasing number of infections among locals, and in the Middle of March 2020, Covid-19 was declared as a pandemic both in Malaysia and at the global level. At the time of writing, the number of Covid-19 cases in Malaysia has increased to 9,240 with 125 deaths (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 6). At the global level, Covid-19 cases have reached tens of millions. The pandemic has adverse effects on the world’s economy causing loss of jobs and a complete halt of many industries including tourism, aviation, leisure, and entertainment. As of August 20, 2020, the worldwide death toll due to Covid-19 has reached 781,677 (World Health Organization, 7). The crisis has raised concerns among medical practitioners and the public since there is no vaccine to eradicate the outbreak. In fact, according to WHO, it will take up to a year to find the vaccine for the virus. Hence, precautionary measures such as social distancing and lockdowns have been put forward to curb its spread.

This pandemic has a huge impact on society and the world. It threatens people’s livelihood, health as well as the economy. Subsequently, it also has an adverse impact on the education sector especially tertiary education as it restricts in campus learning of millions of
With the introduction of the government-enforced movement control order (MCO) in Malaysia, public and private educational institutions were forced to close (Tang, 5). Considering the directives from the government, specifically the Ministry of Higher Education, the management of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) decided to close all its campuses beginning on March 17, 2020 (Universiti Sains Malaysia, 6). The closure has impacted 30,000 students. To address this issue, USM has taken the immediate step to introduce online learning to ensure that the teaching and learning process in the university is not affected by the MCO as face-to-face sessions could not be conducted (Rahman, 3). In response, the Section of Anthropology and Sociology has turned to the online platform to conduct virtual lectures and tutorials.

2. USM Anthropology and Sociology Programme

USM is on the first universities to offer Anthropology and Sociology programme. The information gathered from the School of Social Sciences website reflects the aims of the programme and the specific learning outcomes of the courses offered, as shown below:

- Provides students with the necessary knowledge and skills to understand human and societal behaviour, as well as to examine cultural patterns, problems, and societal changes, specifically in the context in the context of Malaysia, from the Anthropological and Sociological perspectives.
- Develop students’ ability to conduct research using methods and techniques commonly used in the Anthropology and Sociology discipline, such as participant observation and statistics.
- Produce students who are analytical, critical, able to conduct social science research and sensitive towards the changes, dynamics, and development of the society they live in.

The learning outcome is as follow:

- Acquire the basic knowledge about concepts, theories and orientations in Anthropology and Sociology. Gain basic skills in designing and executing social research.
- Analyse and apply perspectives and concepts learned to various social phenomena. Communicate with others and work in groups with confidence.
- Assess and examine issues critically and analytically.

The Bachelor of Social Science programme is designed to provide a broad education in the social sciences with the aims of producing students who are knowledgeable and have an understanding and ability to handle social issues and social problems in innovative ways. Students enrolled in the programme are required to choose a major from one of these four social science disciplines; Anthropology and Sociology, Development Planning and Management, Economics and Political Science. Students are also given the choice of a minor that can be from any one of the minor packages offered by the school or from other schools in USM. While each major has its own requirements, in general, students are required to enrol in university-level courses, basic and common social science courses, major courses, minor courses and elective courses to complete a minimum 122 units for graduation. The Bachelor of Social Sciences program is a four-year programme and the medium of instruction for the programme is Bahasa Malaysia although there are some courses that are offered in English (School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 4). To date, there are 240 first to fourth-year undergraduate students who are majoring in Anthropology and Sociology under this programme.

2.2. Learning and Teaching

In general, the first semester in a Malaysian university’s academic calendar starts in September while Semester II starts in February. The year 2020 has witnessed the unprecedented global health crisis brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. To stop the spread of the novel virus, university campuses were forced to close, and this has adverse effects on the education sector. In Malaysia, the government enforced the MCO on March 18, 2020, which initially planned for two weeks. Subsequently, the MCO has been extended and until today, the country is still in the Restricted Movement Control Order (RMCO) where physical distancing rules and other strict standard operation procedures (SOPs) are still in place. To overcome this restriction put forward by the MCO, the educators of the Anthropology and Sociology section have used online and remote
learning to conduct teaching and learning sessions with their students. In view of the uncertainties of restrictions and SOPs under the MCO, USM announces that the Second Semester for the 2020-2021 academic year will start in April 2020 with full online activities. This includes courses offered by the Anthropology and Sociology section and other Social Sciences courses. USM has introduced several approaches, including webinars and discussions by those with expertise in online teaching. All Anthropology and Sociology educators were required to design their own online teaching and learning courses to avoid any disruption to the teaching and learning process. Although some educators faced difficulties in adapting to this new approach, with tools like Zoom, Webex, lecture recording and social media communications such as WhatsApp and Telegram, have helped the online learning session to go smoothly. In this regard, the provision of blended learning by USM e-learning portal prior to the MCO has helped educators and students to adapt to the new norm.

Lecture notes and supplementary materials from web pages and YouTube are included in their respective e-learning portals and they are accessible before the lecture begins. Students can also interact with the educators through the chat room provided if the internet line is weak and to ask further questions on the topic discussed during the lecture. Students were also given priority during this time so that they are prepared and feel not marginalised or isolated throughout this unpredictable crisis. The School of Social Sciences also took the initiative to send hard and soft copy lecture notes to those facing difficulties to access the internet or facing other constraints.

2.3. Assessment

Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, the marks allocation for most of the courses offered under the Anthropology and Sociology program is 60:40. This means that 60% of the marks are from the examination or tests, and 40% are from coursework’s or assignment. However, due to the closure of the campus, all examinations for Semester II of the 2019/2020 Academic Session were replaced with formative and summative assessments including group assignments, individual assignments, online presentations, quizzes, case studies, and short essays. Hence, students’ grades are 100% based on coursework components. All of these do not affect the original face-to-face module and the learning objectives or outcomes of the existing curriculum.

2.4. Exam Vetting

Another important process is to ensure the quality is maintained despite the grading flexibility granted by the university. Vetting of the coursework was conducted to ensure that the evaluations and assessment for the Anthropology and Sociology programme are in line with the course objectives and adhere to Bloom’s taxonomy. It is tailored to replace final exams for students. Webex and Zoom applications have been used to carry out the vetting process where the educators were divided into several groups to facilitate the vetting process in a confidential manner.

3. Corvid-19 Challenges for Anthropology and Sociology Educators and Students

Anthropology and Sociology educators have faced some difficulties in conducting online remote learning this semester. While educators are used to the conventional practice of teaching students face-to-face, the unprecedented events brought by Covid-19 have forced educators to use alternative approaches to facilitate teaching and learning. While there is no doubt that there are some educators who are trained in digital skills but at the same time, some are new in digital teaching and have low confidence in their ability to facilitate online learning. However, USM through the Centre for Development of Academic Excellence (CDAE), has taken some immediate steps to organise a series of digital courses including USM's e-learning portal optimisation to allow continuous training and discussion. This has helped the university’s academic staff, including Anthropology and Sociology educators to facilitate teaching and learning.

In this light, this initiative helps to build confidence, trust and reliability among educators and ensures that the use of online medium does not affect their ability to present knowledge well, clearly and maintain the momentum with students. Educators who have poor internet access at their homes are given the flexibility by the university’s management to come to the campus and use high-speed internet network provided in the campus.

Students also faced limitations in online learning. The most significant issue is the lack of access to the internet and weak connectivity, specifically in rural areas. At the same time, some urban students face similar problems due to the geographical and demographic limitations. The University and School of Social Sciences have conducted surveys to identify students who face difficulty to access the internet. The Anthropology and Sociology educators have also asked their students if they are having internet problems. It was found that almost 95% of the students have access to the internet and remaining 5% have difficulty due to poor network. Other issues include internet data quota when students have limited data and need to use their data quota to join virtual learning as well as to find materials online for their assignments.
Furthermore, some students have to deal with weak connectivity and low speed and have to go out of their housing area to get better coverage. Meanwhile, some students have no access to laptops or computers at home and face non-conducive environment at home. This indicates that both educators and students are facing issues specifically in terms of speed, data quota and internet connectivity.

To overcome this issue, the educators in the Anthropology and Sociology section have recorded and uploaded their lectures on the e-learning portal and students to allow the students to watch it at their own time. Recorded videos also have lower bandwidth requirement compared to live videos to allow students with slow internet to watch the video. The university has also collaborated with a number of telecommunication service providers (Telcos) to provide students with fast and cost effective access to the internet. Recently, 30,000 'Yes 4G prepaid SIM cards', which provide 40GB free data for 60 days, were distributed to USM students (Karuppayah & Hoe, 1).

4. Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has redefined our lives, including in the realm of education. Although it has led to ‘lockdown’ of all countries including universities, education can continue on an online alternative platform that allows the teaching and learning of the face to be stopped and replaced with a meeting in the virtual and cyber environment. Educators have no choice to choose to learn and adapt to this new approach with ‘social distancing’ and ‘physique distancing’ becoming the buzz word. Each is in their place, but the teaching is continuous, and the learning never ceases or stops.

Unprecedented moments need unprecedented measures including ‘Emergency Teaching and Learning’ as what all the educators started to do. Hence, it is different from Distance Learning Programs designed to deliver using online teaching and learning but in an emergency, the educators managed to build learning materials, adjusted course content and use this new platform to get themselves geared up towards online teaching and learning activities, convert the face-to-face lecture hall sessions into video conferencing lectures via the tools provided during this crisis.

The MCO has shown that education as a foundation in the social structure of society is not compromised including in universities. The Anthropology and Sociology educators are serious about ensuring that they play their part well, with the support of USM and School of Social Sciences in the preparation of the initiative to move towards teaching and learning online. USM was one of the first universities to go into online classes fully with the initial planning by the Vice-Chancellor and the university's leadership and management team.

It is hoped that the Anthropology and Sociology educators will utilize existing resources, training and facilities for learning and support of university and School of Social Sciences structures as well so that teaching and learning will continue in the spirit of 'Anthropology and Sociology educators solidarity'. The WhatsApp group of educators who share information and links that can be used to manage learning and teaching shows that everyone is committed to ensuring students do not face physiological or stress issues as a result of changing communication and teaching mechanisms. This includes students who are facing limitations and challenges including for the vulnerable, academically weak and need special assistance.

While there are some uncertainties as to when Covid-19 will end, at least the Anthropology and Sociology educators will be prepared to face this obstacle and deal with this pandemic. It can only be achieved fully with the intention of 'being together' facing this epidemic in ensuring that education is not spared and the teacher-student relationship remains significant in realizing the vision, mission and objectives of each program and course. At the end, what is most pertinent is to make sure the teaching and learning process is effective and in place without compromising the knowledge and quality of tertiary education.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

REFERENCES


