

CHAPTER 1 OVERVIEW OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

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1.1 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs), such as public and private universities, polytechnics, and community colleges, are overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education. Five public universities in Malaysia have been designated as research universities, receiving increased funding for research and commercialization initiatives. These universities, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia which enjoy greater autonomy in administrative, financial, academic management, and student intake processes. The designation as a research university is aimed at fostering excellence within the Malaysian higher education system. In contrast, the remaining public universities are categorized as either comprehensive or specialized institutions.

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) plays a pivotal role in maintaining the quality of higher education. MQA oversees quality assurance, course accreditation, and other related responsibilities at HEIs. Until now, the Ministry of Higher Education has emphasized the importance of globalization. Numerous initiatives have been implemented to elevate Malaysian institutions' global rankings and fulfil the Ministry's

purpose of sustaining a high-quality education ecosystem that nurtures individual potential and supports national development goals.

Education is widely recognized as the key driver of national growth and economic sustainability. A successful education system can enhance productivity, growth rates, personal health, and other factors. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysian universities concentrated on traditional, in-person education practices. Most students were required to remain on campus and attend face-to-face classes. However, the pandemic introduced widespread disruptions across various sectors, including education. As a result, online learning emerged as a central and often contentious topic in the realm of higher education. The unprecedented shift brought about by the pandemic propelled virtual learning to the forefront of global teaching and learning practices, effectively replacing traditional face-to-face classes with digital alternatives.

1.2 ENFORCEMENT OF DIGITAL EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC

After the outbreak in February 2020, many nations implemented social isolation and residential quarantine for their citizens. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), over 160 nations enacted nationwide closures, affecting roughly 87% of students in higher education. It is estimated that billions of students who relied on face-to-face interaction in educational institutions were notably impacted during the shutdown. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the education profile has evolved from physical to digital, including online learning and internet platforms. Systems for video and teleconference, such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, and Webex, have become popular as alternatives to traditional education, allowing educational institutions to successfully carry on with their programs.

The most critical element of online learning is the use of technology. Various terms for online learning have been coined, including e-learning, remote learning, and virtual learning. All are indicative of

the nature of online learning. The pandemic compelled educators to rapidly adjust their teaching approaches. Globally, education is shifting away from a teacher-centric teaching-learning process toward a student-centric teaching-learning process, away from traditional disciplines, and interdisciplinary courses.

According to Maqableh et al. (2023), online learning might be helpful and successful if two primary criteria were changed: (1) Enhancing students' and teachers' accessibility and autonomy and (2) Producing study material content to facilitate interplay between all learning elements. Since learning often occurs through interaction with others, collaborative elements such as discussions and assessments which can enhance the social aspect of education. Lecturers can improve the effectiveness of online learning by designing engaging courses, preparing students for virtual learning environments, and implementing synchronous interaction methods.

Despite prior COVID-19 research focusing on online learning in HEIs, studies in the context of developing countries have often been qualitative and subjective in nature (Zarei & Mohammadi, 2022). Simultaneously, academics and students face challenges, such as the inability to access online resources, difficulties adjusting to new teaching methods and their mental health, particularly for students from remote places. On the other hand, Poudevigne et al. (2022) offer insight into students' mental health and coping strategies when taking virtual classes. As a result, it is crucial to comprehend the numerous problems that university students experienced throughout the pandemic, especially in adapting to online courses.

1.3 CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

Even though online learning offers many advantages, it also presents several drawbacks that must be acknowledged. Concerns have been raised regarding student engagement in virtual classrooms. Many students, especially those from low-income households, face challenges such as poor internet connection and lack of access to digital devices.