The Star

Are we ready for hybrid learning?

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Dons: Ensure digital access, academic rigour and quality of programmes first

COVID-19 forced higher education institutions (HEIs) to go online but three years on, a borderless education landscape, a push for lifelong learning and changing student preferences, indicate that virtual lessons are here to stay – at least in the form of a flexible hybrid system.

Hybrid learning, which is a mix of in-person and remote learning methods, is gaining traction with the Higher Education Ministry taking the lead.

In March 2023, former higher education minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin announced that the 2023/24 public university admissions would see 95 bachelor degree programmes across 19 institutions adopt a flexible hybrid learning system which would only require students to attend lectures in their first and final year.

The duration of study for some 44 programmes in nine higher education institutes was also shortened from four to three years.

The measures were introduced in public HEIs to give students more flexibility and allow them to save on tertiary education costs, with private HEIs moving in a similar direction.

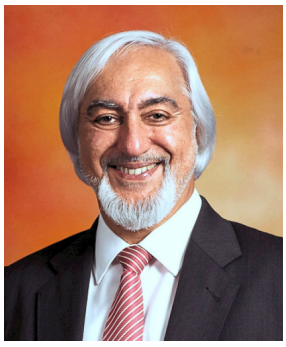
Following the Cabinet reshuffle on Dec 12, the Higher Education Ministry, in a response to StarEdu, said it will still need to work on the mechanism for flexible hybrid learning to be implemented fully.

The ministry added it will need to reevaluate the current selected programmes to see if they are suitable for the flexible hybrid learning system.

Its implementation, experts say, requires careful consideration of various factors, including demand and supply, programme standard, infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities.

Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu) president Datuk Parmjit Singh said enrolment rates are expected to soar with the rollout of a new flexible hybrid system.

> To meet the high demand, urgent upscaling of capacity is needed, he opined.



Parmjit

Referencing a 2021 Coursera report, he said flexibility appeals to students with 71% of learners favouring hybrid models.

“Malaysian universities are actively preparing to meet this increased demand, having developed their capabilities even prior to the pandemic and then having had the

opportunity to fully deploy their online and hybrid learning models during and immediately after," Parmjit told StarEdu.

University of Reading Malaysia provost and chief executive officer Prof Wing Lam said university enrolment rates may rise as more institutions roll out hybrid versions of their most in-demand courses.

"To control these rates, institutions can be selective in the initial set of programmes for rollout and, if required, cap enrolment numbers until they are confident of scaling up their operations," he said, adding that hybrid learning may appeal to groups who would otherwise contemplate not going to university.

"Secondary school-leavers are increasingly turning their back on further education because they wish to start work and earn an income as soon as possible.

"Many parents are also concerned about the cost of university studies, particularly if students are normally required to live away from home.

"Hybrid learning might also appeal to working professionals who are in full-time employment and are seeking flexible ways to upgrade themselves within their busy schedule," he said.

Depending on how it is implemented, he said a hybrid learning model might entice these groups by making university education either more affordable or more flexible, allowing them to work and study simultaneously.

The mode of delivery in hybrid education, said Parmjit, sets it apart from in-class methods, necessitating a corresponding adjustment in assessment techniques.



Lam

“For example, it is common practice to give a percentage of course grade for online discussions as these discussions will connect in-class with online students better,” he said.

He said the Malaysian Qualifications Agency’s (MQA) focus areas on programme development, student learning assessments, and resource provisions have assisted institutions in strategising accordingly.

“However, assessing online teaching techniques, digital tools and virtual environments using the same quality benchmarks set for face-to-face programmes can pose challenges in maintaining rigour,” he said, adding that committing to retaining educational quality and rigour throughout programme transformation is crucial.

Currently, the MQA allows flexibility of hybrid-blended learning approaches for conventional programmes within their regulatory and accreditation frameworks, allowing up to 60% of total credit hours.

Programmes with over 60% of their credits delivered online are eligible for temporary accreditation as open and distance learning (ODL) by the MQA.

Parmjit said institutions transitioning to hybrid must undertake thorough self-evaluations and external review processes to demonstrate meeting evolving MQA accreditation standards.

“This could involve aligning hybrid programme components such as programme and course learning outcomes, assessments and learner support to updated specifications.

“As Malaysia’s higher education oversight bodies refine quality assurance policies for recognising non-traditional learning, universities must likewise fine-tune hybrid-blended models to uphold stringent nationwide academic standards. A shared commitment to enable enrichment and access can make this transition successful,” he added.

Challenges ahead

Ensuring equitable, nationwide access to the technology is a notable challenge to hybrid learning, said Parmjit.

“While the government’s dedication to addressing rural Internet connectivity issues is evident through initiatives like the National Fiberisation and Connectivity Plan (NFCP), financial, infrastructural and digital disparities hinder equal access to technology-driven education,” he said.

In 2019, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) allocated RM21.6bil to provide both urban and rural groups equal Internet connectivity across the country under the NFCP.

The five-year plan which concluded last year was aimed at bridging the digital divide and spurring the adoption of new technologies such as 5G.

“However, challenges still persist. Though 83% of rural households now have baseline Internet access as a result of these efforts, only 55% own a computer or device that would allow them to effectively participate in hybrid education,” Parmjit added.

This, he said, highlights the need for supplementary initiatives to improve Internet access and to provide students from low-income families with the necessary devices.

The government and non-profit organisations may need to subsidise the cost of owning devices if we are to ensure equitable access, he said.

Agreeing, Prof Lam said hybrid learning, which includes live online lectures, typically requires high-speed Internet, which raises concerns about both Internet access and affordability for students in rural or low-income areas.

“For those without high-speed Internet access, it is possible to make recordings or video files available for download separately, and to ensure that all course materials are available in a downloadable digital format.

“It is also possible to design programmes in a way where, for example, one semester is spent on campus, and another semester is spent working from home where students are independently studying digital content.

“However, what tends to lead to better levels of student engagement is when there is continuous real-time interaction, whether face to face or virtual, throughout the entire course,” said Prof Lam.Besides access to technology, negative parental perceptions, especially among underprivileged groups who do not accept hybrid learning as

equivalent to in-person classes, could also stem the uptake of hybrid learning, Parmjit added.

“Hybrid education can also increase the risk of academic dishonesty among students, lower student engagement and motivation over time, and hamper their interpersonal skill development.

“In the long term, hybrid education could also lead to social isolation, poor physical activity, heightened stress and anxiety, and digital fatigue from increased workloads and deadlines for students,” he said.

Universities that adopt and promote hybrid learning must monitor and address these issues, he said, adding that initiatives to refocus and enhance mental health services are critical.

To recognise these challenges and actively address them, institutions must invest in infrastructure, systems and comprehensive training to equip educators to deliver high-quality hybrid and flexible learning, said Parmjit, who is also the Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation (APU) chief executive officer.“Initiatives at APU are underway to guarantee all students have the necessary technology access and support they require to thrive within hybrid-blended environments.

“Academic staff are also provided with the necessary training and support to enable a successful transition.“Though this transition can be complex, careful planning and execution can lead to the successful realisation of a flexible hybrid education system,” he said.

Guidelines crucial

In planning a robust hybrid education model, Prof Lam said when a programme is also recognised or accredited by a professional body, institutions are advised to check with the body to understand to what extent a flexible hybrid delivery is allowed.

“To maintain academic standards, an institution needs to ensure that there is a sound, quality assurance framework in line with MQA guidelines.

“This includes clearly articulated programme and course learning outcomes, and the completion of readings, coursework assessments, and where required, examinations, that demonstrate the satisfaction of learning outcomes.

“Participation in lectures, whether online or face to face, may also be required for successful completion of a course. In general, one would expect to see comparable coursework and assessment standards between courses of the same quality, regardless of how they are delivered,” he said.

Parmjit said navigating regulatory dimensions to enable hybrid learning while prioritising academic excellence are also important, and this requires the collaboration between the Higher Education Ministry, accreditation and professional bodies and HEIs.

Adapting to the shift, he said, brings challenges in upholding academic standards.Suggesting the need for developing guidelines through ongoing collaboration with educational institutions, Parmjit said a clear set of guidelines focused on academic integrity, continuous professional development, security, and equitable access can help to ensure standards during this transition.

“Proactive internal monitoring systems would enable institutions to harness the benefits of flexible models while safeguarding quality.

“For example, requiring all HEIs to have honour codes, anti-plagiarism software, proctored exams, and multifactor authentication, could reduce cheating.

“Anonymous reporting of dishonest behaviour via educational apps could also prove effective,” he said.

Yay or nay?

I am interested in hybrid lessons since it combines the perks of both physical and online learning. During face-to-face lessons, there are fewer distractions so I tend to focus more and pay attention to the classes, which improves my learning efficiency. On the other hand, online sessions usually have flexible schedules and can be held wherever, which accommodates students who live far away from the university or college. These lessons would also be recorded, which can be used for future reference. Having hybrid classes also allows students to switch between online and face-to-face school. It can otherwise be troublesome to travel back and forth just to attend one class.– **Carissa Stuart, 16**

For A-Levels and college courses, I prefer fully in-person classes. The workload is much heavier than in secondary school, and students have less than 18 months to learn it all. The material is more complex, requiring deeper analysis and understanding. Online

classes lack the engaging interaction of face-to-face learning and can be dull for both teacher and student. In physical classes, students participate more readily, communication flows smoothly, and there are fewer interruptions like lagging Wi-Fi. This allows for quicker absorption of information and immediate question formation. However, online classes are sometimes needed, for example to replace missed lessons.**– Hayley Poh, 17**

I prefer hybrid lessons as I can experience the best of both worlds. In-person lessons provide an interactive lecture hall environment which makes it easier to comprehend complex topics. Any doubt or confusion would be clarified on the spot as well. Attending lectures and following a structured routine is what truly embodies student life. However, rigid schedules can sometimes pose a barrier. Online classes allow me to stay on track with my studies, get enough rest, and still pursue my interests. Hybrid lessons are the perfect solution for me! – **Thanushri Sandrasekar, 18**