

# The discourse: 'Covid-19 no impact on quality of grads'

By REBECCA RAJAENDRAM

EDUCATION 

Sunday, 05 Jun 2022



Level up: Immersing themselves in learning through technology actually makes pandemic students more employable, thanks to the new skills they pick up. – Filepic

## New skills gained as a result of the pandemic

WHILE Covid-19 had robbed higher education students of their time on campus, it does not mean that those who graduated during the pandemic are of lesser quality than their predecessors.

The pandemic, said Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman, had forced lessons to go online and delayed students' graduations but the quality of education and of the graduates was not compromised.

While acknowledging that the pandemic had many negative effects with businesses closing, people losing their jobs, and the lack of employment opportunities, he said it does not mean that those with the right skills would not be able to land their dream jobs. The most important element of successful employment is quality education and having the right attributes, he said when commenting on the Chegg.org 2022 Global Student Survey, which saw many students lamenting how the pandemic had prevented them from taking full advantage of the campus life experience which brings with it invaluable knowledge and skills.



Syed Hussain: Digital skills have moved from being 'optional' to 'critical', are in high demand and greatly improve prospects for employment.

“To be employed in a connected economy, new entrants to the labour market must possess digital skills together with other abilities such as strong literacy and numeracy skills, critical and innovative thinking, complex problem-solving skills, the ability to collaborate, and socio-emotional skills.” Digital skills have moved from being 'optional' to 'critical', are in high demand and greatly improve prospects for employment.

“In a competitive labour market, employability is highly dependent on whether one’s skills match those which are demanded by industry.

“Hence, graduates must know what hard and soft skills are needed if they are to secure a job upon graduation,” Syed Hussain told StarEdu.

In the transition to the endemic stage, employers are concerned about the sustainability of their businesses and the ability to be agile and responsive to the uncertainty arising from new Covid-19 variants, natural disasters and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, he added.



Teh: Students have picked up on how to be more agile, which is the ability to move quickly, change and adapt to the changes brought on by the pandemic.

Those who graduated during the pandemic, he said, have one clear advantage over their seniors who entered the workforce earlier.



“Those who weathered the pandemic as students have the ability to navigate virtual platforms for communication.

“Exposure to e-learning platforms and the ability to use emerging information technologies in their education journey will better equip graduates as they join the labour force.

“Team collaboration for projects undertaken in the universities would allow them to integrate more easily when they are employed.

“This is especially so in the future of the working world where flexible and remote work arrangements take centre stage,” he noted.



Agreeing, National Association of Private Educational Institutions (NAPEI) secretary-general Dr Teh Choon Jin said experiences faced by students during the pandemic and how they overcame the challenges that arose served as lessons for them to face the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) world which exists today.

“Students can learn from their experiences in navigating and solving complex problems in the VUCA world,” he said, adding that students have picked up on how to be more agile as a result.

When they graduate and enter the working world, these students will have the ability to move quickly and adapt to the changes brought on by the pandemic.

Such skills are important for when they have to face management changes in their organisations or business environment.



Teh, who is also Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation (APU) senior director and registrar, said students have learnt how to adapt to the new norms of living, which include a move from physical interaction to virtual modes of communication.

“Digital communication is becoming the norm. This accelerated the development of the virtual experience and activities in the metaverse globally, which is the next generation of the Internet,” he said, adding that this cohort of students will form the majority of users in the virtual world.

Citing the World Economic Forum “The Future of Jobs Report 2020”, he said technological adoption is among the key main changes in the global business environment.

“Students gained from the pandemic experience by enhancing their IT skills. They are not only more ready for the modern workplace, but are also more independent in learning, have the ability to solve problems, and are able to tackle challenges creatively.



“The challenges brought on by Covid-19 forced students to become more responsible for their own learning and growth.

“They had to have self-discipline as they were confined indoors either in their own homes or in their rented accommodations with little physical interaction with their peers during the pandemic,” he said.

Teh said institutions of higher learning have also been playing their part to prevent students from losing out on the tertiary education experience.

Whether it is face-to-face or virtual delivery of teaching and learning, institutions must meet the programme learning outcomes which include embedded soft skills, he said.

“The institutions were still able to help students hone their soft skills via online platforms while adjustments were made to the methodology by incorporating technology,” he said, adding that most organisations prioritise soft skills over academic performance when hiring.

## THE VIEWS

"No doubt, students have suffered because of the pandemic. Our study routine was turned upside d and our mental health had suffered yet companies raised their hiring requirements to stabilise their businesses. I am still confident of joining the working world as I made the best of the situation despite having to spend two-thirds of my tertiary education journey online. However, in Malaysia, graphic

artists like me are hired and expected to understand the needs of the clients immediately and to solve all issues raised without room for trial and error. If you fail, you are deemed unfit for the industry. No matter how skilled, a fresh graduate has no work experience so this is an unrealistic expectation to have of us." - **Jaime Lau Aik Seng, 22**

"Many companies were badly hit and this resulted in higher unemployment rates. These companies could not afford to hire, so fresh graduates were left out in the cold. It is daunting for those of us who are about to enter the job market because employers expect us to be very skilled in our fields, despite the fact that our education was disrupted during the pandemic. There were many restrictions which hampered our learning and ability to compete. Practical, hands-on lessons had to be moved online, which made teaching and learning difficult and less effective. The majority of us students didn't like online learning as it was really hard to focus and participate."- **Muhammad Fahmi Saleh, 22**

"This pandemic gave us the opportunity to explore more job prospects, especially on online platforms. Moving forward, most jobs will require knowledge of online platforms and technology. The online education we were exposed to prepared us well for the current job market. Having to do most of our studies online made us more tech-savvy and probably more employable. As most things can be done online now, there is a bigger opportunity for us to get into better paying jobs." - **Kathiyainie Puspanathan, 21**