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BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POST-PANDEMIC: ADVANCING SDG 4

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INTRODUCTION

"HOW MALAYSIA IS TACKLING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE"

The Digital Divide in Education

The digital divide has significantly impacted education during the pandemic, restricting students' access to digital resources. Many students have lacked Internet access, digital devices, and literacy skills required to engage effectively in online learning (OECD, 2018). Advantaged schools have been better equipped, whereas underprivileged students have struggled with limited access to learning opportunities (The Star, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). A UNICEF report has found that 9 out of 10 young women in the world's poorest countries lack Internet access, exacerbating educational and gender inequalities (UNICEF, 2023). In Malaysia, the digital divide has become a major concern during the pandemic, affecting around 4.9 million school students and 1.3 million higher education students. A 2020 Ministry of Education survey has revealed that 57% of students did not own digital devices for online learning. Consequently, Malaysia has experienced one of the highest learning losses among Asian developing nations, second only to Myanmar (Khazanah, 2023). Extreme cases, such as students climbing trees or studying on hilltops for Internet access, have highlighted the severity of the issue (Subramaniam et al., 2024). Furthermore, the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC, 2020) has reported a decline in Internet growth during the pandemic, affecting students' ability to participate in online learning.

Education is a fundamental human right and the cornerstone of personal growth, economic progress, and societal development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (UNICEF, 2023). However, progress has been slow, with only 58% of students globally reaching minimum proficiency in reading by 2019 (United Nations, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated educational challenges, particularly in marginalised and low-income communities, highlighting issues like inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and the widening digital divide.

Bridging the Digital Divide

The Malaysian Government has introduced initiatives to enhance digital education and reduce inequalities. The Digital Education Policy (DEP) has emphasised digital skills, ethics, and technology awareness (The Star, 2023). Hybrid Classrooms equipped with smartboards and digital devices are being expanded to rural areas (MyEdvolution, 2024). The MyDIGITAL Blueprint includes programmes, such as "My Device", which provide students with Internet access and learning tools (Vulcanpost, 2021). In the meantime, the JENDELA Programme aims to enhance Internet infrastructure by expanding 4G coverage and increasing broadband speeds, ensuring widespread connectivity (The Edge Malaysia, 2025). Besides, public-private partnerships with tech companies like Huawei have also contributed to improving digital access in education (Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia, 2021). Despite progress, challenges still persist. Many rural areas still lack adequate connectivity, and equitable resource distribution remains a concern. Connectivity in regions like Sarawak remains below national targets, with plans to increase 4G coverage from 66% to 93.6% by 2024 and 99.9% by 2030 (Govinsider, 2024). Likewise, affordability also remains a barrier, as fixed broadband costs in low-income countries can consume a third of a household's income (International Telecommunication Union, 2024).

CONCLUSION

While Malaysia has made strides in addressing the digital divide in education, rural and low-income communities continue to face challenges. Sustainable investments in infrastructure, affordability measures, and targeted policies are crucial to ensuring equitable digital access and fostering inclusive education for all.

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The Midst of a Lullaby

The Midst of a Lullaby

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*In the midst of a lullaby,
I sit by his door
and listen
to the hush of his dreams.
Once, his hands were tiny,
Grasping mine like lifelines.
Now, they move with purpose,
tracing maps, sketching flags,
telling me stories of kings and empires,
His world is alive with questions,
and quiet wonder.*

*I miss holding him close,
as he drifted to sleep in my lap,
surrounded by Legos,
His little world is in constant motion,
building, breaking,
then building it all over again.*

*Those endless loops of joy
only a child could understand.*

*But I also watch him grow,
inch by inch,
into someone
I'm proud of to know.*

*And in the solace of night and day,
I pray that
he always finds his way
back to me,
no matter how far he roams.*



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