

DIGITAL DIVIDE IN EDUCATION

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The advancement of online learning has positively impacted the educational sector worldwide. It has helped educators and students to accelerate their teaching and learning processes. Educators are seen to harness online learning potentials as powerful tools in helping students to acquire knowledge and essential skills, equipping them in the face of future challenges such as uncertainties in the job market and ever-increasing demands of reskilling and upskilling to accommodate the needs of future employers.



The rise of online learning was expedited by Covid-19. Despite all the terrible situations and news brought to us throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we must admit that it has managed to significantly increase our level of adaptability in life. This happened in the education sector as well. It was not a long time ago that virtual classrooms and cloud-native collaboration apps, for example, were considered unfamiliar approaches and tools for delivering syllabuses, sharing knowledge and communicating with each other in a classroom setting. In less than two years, educators and students all around the world at all levels of education were able to master these skills, bringing things to new heights. All of these and many more positive outcomes in the education sector happened due to our capability to adapt and adjust according to our environment.

However, through all the glory and joy of online learning advancement that we managed to grasp within the pandemic period, it has also demonstrated the need for us to address the digital divide which exists in the teaching and learning environment. Digital divide can be referred to as the existing gap in terms of access to modern information and communications technology (ICT) amongst people who are fortunate enough to have it and those who don't. In the context of teaching and learning, the existence of a digital divide could be regarded as an unfair advantage or disadvantage to two different individuals who should be presented with equal opportunities to learn and grow.

As education begins to be more reliant on technology, those who are on the unfortunate side of the digital divide experience their education in a much more challenging environment. Global Chief Technology Officer of Dell Technologies, John J. Roesse, stressed the importance of internet connectivity in the effort to narrow the gap. He suggested that the lack of connectivity between the urban and rural areas, for example, is an issue of universal human rights. A report by the International Telecommunication Union showed that the global internet connectivity penetration was rated at only 47% in developing countries before the pandemic. The pandemic, however, has further impacted the rate of internet connectivity since the global lockdown has created an overwhelming demand for ICT infrastructures. Several countries, including Malaysia, managed to update their digital strategies to adapt to the current environment. The Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint which was introduced during the pandemic has incorporated the effort to focus on enabling digital infrastructure to support digitalisation thus narrowing the digital divide in our country.

Furthermore, the education sector has witnessed various measures implemented to address the issue of digital divide, from Community Internet Centres to subsidized and free devices such as laptops and tablets in order to ensure everyone has access and equal opportunity to experience quality online learning. However, we need to accept that all these measures, although effective and beneficial, could not eradicate the digital divide once and for all, since the core issue of its existence is much more complex than online learning and providing connectivity or devices for everyone.

Jan van Dijk, a prominent Dutch researcher in the field of digital inequalities, concluded that digital divide exists due to differences in the economy, social, political, cultural and personal capabilities of an individual or a society. Each of these aspects contributes to the effectiveness in narrowing the gap in digital divide in education. Therefore, it is undeniable that the issue of digital divide differs from one country to another, since the reasons and available variables that contributed to each aspect are unique to the features of a country.

It is crucial for stakeholders in our education sector to play their role in ensuring Malaysia is heading in the right direction in handling the issue of digital divide. Regardless of several hiccups along the way, we believe Malaysia is heading in the right direction.

