Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim [1], Dr. Oo Yu Hock [2] and Joseph Adaikalam [3]

Research Article

Windows into Work from Home in Higher Education Institutions: Challenges of New Normal Culture in Management

Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim [1], Dr. Oo Yu Hock [2] and Joseph Adaikalam [3]

[1] Professor and Dean Binary University of Management & Entrepreneurship,
[2] Professor, Asia e University
[3] Professor, Founder and Executive Chairman, Binary University of Management & Entrepreneurship, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The least one would expect of an academic institution of higher learning, as a provider of knowledge delivery and practice – depending on the nature, curricula, programs and standard operating procedure (SOP) governance and compliance, is to become increasingly immersed in the advocacy-practice of new normal culture ensuing the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, prohibitive policy requirements, emaciated businesses and atrophied consumerism, and restrictive mobility in public places and premises of business complexes including the so-called 'corridors of knowledge' or the old 'ivory tower' of yesteryears.

'Work from Home' (WFH) has never been the same again since the concept, years ago in good economic times and experimental employer-employee models of working-managing choices, started as an option of the corporate world to allow its employees to improve productivity with the liberty of WFH environment. Today, under the hovering cloud of death-threatening COVID epidemic and the virus-vaccination against its host of mutations, WFH is reshaped by a culture of new norms touted as 'new normal'. The prevailing normative culture and conventional SOPs of higher institutions of learning are, and its delivery of crisis management results must now become, a phenomenological expression of the new reality to operate education more effective and efficiently.

It is no longer an issue of retaining competitiveness or to claim the trophy of competitive advantage. It is more than an issue of survival but essentially a solution-driven commitment to grow a new direction for education delivery of content, methods and other paraphernalia of teaching-learning tools for beneficiaries, communities, societies and country to generate new values and winning strategies in the public interest. In this paper, '*iSOS*' (institutional Survival on Sustenance) and '*iSOWS*' (institution Solutions of Winning Strategies) are tendered as value-conserving and value-creating complementary platforms, without compromising the fundamental philosophical foundation of education per se, to turnaround the inertia of COVID-19 inhibitive disruptions in the management and delivery of the higher education chain of business continuity.

Key Words: knowledge delivery, advocacy-practice, new normal, culture, management, teaching-learning tools, complementary platforms, iSOS-iSOWS, values, public interest, business continuity

Introduction
As a provider of knowledge delivery and practice – depending on the nature, curricula, programs and standard operating procedures (SOPs) of governance and compliance, private institutions of higher

Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim [1], Dr. Oo Yu Hock [2] and Joseph Adaikalam [3]

education (PrIHE) or '*institut pengajian tinggi swasta*' (IPTS) are left with limited if not no choice but to 'reinvent' themselves to be more relevant-centric first against a host of other social enterprise values that pale under the looming red of operational balance sheets. Under such circumstances, they have become increasingly self-centred on '**iSOS**' (institutional Survival on Sustenance), justified or otherwise, to remain operational with seemingly unpopular (to 'internal clients' - the staff or employees) yet realistic (from owner-manager perspectives) moves to stabilize organizational disruptions in the unrelenting waves of a 2-year old COVID-19 pandemic plus virulent emergence of Delta episodes. The menu of government declarations, daily monitoring announcements, and emergency promulgation actions, blanketed by a diversity of public opinions on vaccination programs and types of vaccines together with white flag-black clothes citizenry appeals for aids and equitable treatments respectively, are not helping to defuse the uncertainties of status quo over loss of jobs, stymied small businesses, gradual demise of economic-value contributing enterprises, a downward trend of financing debts and even the emaciated trajectory decline of national economic health.

Consequently, the compounding variants of extended movement control operations (MCO) and emergency movement control operations (EMCO), with threats of keen eyes on enforcement of restriction-violations and somewhat forbearing practices of hefty fines even imprisonment have not been helpful in restoring the vicissitudes of on-site in-campus human-interaction – a landmark branding in higher learning institutions for centuries – where masses of lively students seek knowledge, qualifications and are socialized about learning-sharing, living-working life experiences for livelihood, living, life values and lifestyles that define and shape human communities, societies, countries and nations.

I. New Normal Culture

Like the PrIHE or IPTS, public institutions of higher education (PuIHE) or *institut pengajian tinggi awam* (IPTA) too suffer the backlash of COVID repercussions but to a lesser extent in terms of student numbers (and also correspondingly the degree of severity in terms of restrained government budgetary allocations). The similarity ends there as PrHIE strive to stay in the business of education depending very much on the consistency of student-recruitment numbers, strategic improvement in business-marketing effectiveness, and fresh infusion of management efficiency (Schindehutte et al., 2009). These aspects become more critical and urgent as the escalation of the advocacy-practice of new normal culture intensified ensuing the ominous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are all compelled to review, analyse, discuss and offer solutions to reduce and obliterate the unintended consequences of lockdowns, prohibitive policy requirements, emaciated businesses and atrophied consumerism, and restrictive mobility in public places and premises of business complexes including the so-called 'corridors of knowledge' or the old 'ivory tower' of yesteryears. A new culture, by whatever nomenclature including 'new normal' is a necessary imperative that is only bounded by the limitations of the human mind; in this case, the providers of PrIHE and its organizational paraphernalia, operational teams and functional education-wares. The prevailing 'ways of doing things' (otherwise known as 'culture of work' specifically or 'culture of organization' generally) cannot function like before; they must be renovated partially, if not fully, to match the pressing COVID strains and post-COVID demands respectively for not only iSOS (institution Survival of Sustenance) status quo-maintenance but also '*iSOWS*' (*institution Solutions of Winning Strategies*) virility mobility toward new ventures.

(a) Culture of '*iSOS*'

Simply defined, '**sustenance**' refers to the life-supporting means (in this instance, the current financial capability or capacity) of operating and sustaining a stagnant status quo of limited cash flow injection (as new income-source increasingly blurs) while shouldering the burden of ongoing expenditures. It

Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim [1], Dr. Oo Yu Hock [2] and Joseph Adaikalam [3]

suggests a state of urgency to '**survive**' ongoing operations, minus the bleak prospects of fresh income-flow against a biting withdrawal-injection of whatever (or contingency) reserves available. This culture, currently hovering the heads of IPTS providers, seems to be the *modus operandi* adopted to minimize cost against diminishing income from poor enrolment locally and more so overseas applicants, the latter subject to prohibitive cross-country travel and inhibitive quarantine requirements which compound the hassles of limited and restrictive air and host-country ground transportation logistics too (Baker et al., 2020).

Given the prevailing influence of COVID uncertainties, the 'institutional Survival on Sustenance' (*iSOS*) culture has manifested itself in cost-cutting measures including the muted silence of more than one-third to half salary deductions for staff, the insidious casual reminder of potential staff attrition, the subtle lamentation of possible and probable more unkind cuts, among others. In short, aggravating a demoralizing working milieu and anxiety-stressful key support staff including the academic core of the institutions is this continuing real and muted reinforcing ominous '**r**educe-**e**liminate-**d**iscard' (RED) warning-action that tremor the organizational foundation of human-sensitive business of education delivery. The more significant implication is the negative impact of how such employment displacement affect the nature, nurture and maturation of the future generation of disrupted qualification-educated workforce and their potential contributions to the overall economic well-being of the country.

(b) **Culture of '*iSOWS*'**

Simply defined, 'Solutions of Winning Strategies' (*SOWS*) refer to the art and science of designing, executing and managing a strategic plan to achieve operation and transformation goals of sustaining, improving and growing business. In this context, it necessitates moving the inertia of COVID arrested business status quo to a virile motion of manoeuvrable steps to innovate the deflated dynamics of the business of higher education today. In short, the proposed set of solutions is directed at conceiving both a rethink of strategic management in competitive advantage and a criteria-set of proposed winnable strategies to turnaround the organizational lethargy of '**r**educe-**e**liminate-**d**iscard' (RED) practice in *iSOS* into convertible practical action plan for canniness in despondent IPTS. This requires the formulation of a motivational approach to '**g**enerate-**r**evitalize-**e**nrich-**e**ngage-**n**etworking (GREEN) to propel energizing booster for change-dynamics in the implicit conventional IPTS-MOE interactive dialog result-outcome model that remains largely unchanged over the years.

IV. Content Analysis

'**Work from Home**' (**WFH**) has never been the same again since the concept, years ago in good economic times and experimental employer-employee models of working-managing choices, started as an option of the corporate world to allow its employees to improve productivity with the liberty of WFH environment. Today, under the hovering cloud of death-threatening COVID epidemic and the virus-vaccination against its host of mutations, WFH is reshaped by a culture of new norms touted as 'new normal'. The prevailing normative culture and conventional SOPs of higher institutions of learning are, and its delivery of crisis management results must now become, a phenomenological expression of the new reality to operate education more effective and efficiently. It is no longer an issue of retaining competitiveness or to claim the trophy of competitive advantage but it is essentially an issue of survival to grow a new direction for education delivery of content, methods and other paraphernalia of teaching-

Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim [1], Dr. Oo Yu Hock [2] and Joseph Adaikalam [3]

learning tools for beneficiaries, communities and societies alike of higher education institutions that provide values in the public interest (Barrero et al., 2021).

The fundamental of education cannot be compromised, that is, education is the process, a continuous but life-long staggered knowledge acquisition-learning applications over time, circumstances and opportunities, within and outside the confines of organizational settings and throughout various modes and personalities of deliberate and voluntary deliveries that culminate in a formalized award of Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees attesting the achievement-performance results of successful completion of an approved course or program at committed level(s) of policy-endorsed progressive study. There may be compromises along the way by both institutions of private and public institutions of higher education, especially in challenging times of COVID-19 threats and restrictive online-subscribed self-dependent study of Work-from-Home (Hossain et al., 2020). These may take numerous forms including better flexible allowances or options for retakes or resits of unsatisfactory or failed results at specified time and space (with no penalty or any other additional payments imposed) in accordance with 'temporary suspension of related-required institutional SOPs. This is, of course, the easier of the functional operation tasks that require the practical wisdom of internal institutional administration (Williamson and Zeng, 2009); but the more difficult policy-governance operation tasks that require compliance with regulatory-approved assessment framework based on risk-penalty enforcement by the external authority-approving government agency. The former, as an administrative-facilitating convenience and the latter, as quality-control necessity, are thus challenged to compromise an organizational business-continuity imperative and a governmental mechanism of regulatory-consistency imperative respectively. The issue of compromise requires a 'give-and-take' consensus for mutual benefits, without the stigma of 'face loss' or the need to invoke political intervention against bureaucratic obstinacy. In this way, as a form of encouragement to perform better or to remedy inadvertent weakness to perform credibly, the process education progress and the spirit of knowledge learning-application represent a 'give-and-take' compromise that ensures the concessionary allowances do not undermine the quality of delivered programs, the credibility of certifications, and the professionalism of institutional compliance with policy-authority governance. This is of paramount importance because, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "any compromise on mere fundamentals is a surrender, for it is all give and take" whereas "all compromise is based on give and take" (cited source is anonymous).

V. Recommendations

A better option is to reduce if not eliminate the demoralizing impact on core or critical academic staff through the unequitable and threatening practice of *iSOS* because an institution of higher education, in a large and integral part, is constituted by a credible community of qualified and experienced academic staff, even though key administrative-support staff are necessary although the latter can be substituted with a better part of technology-management applications. Hence, the movement to *iSOWS* is a logical move that promotes translating creative ideas into innovative products and actions that can vouchsafe for building, restoring and fortifying relationships that are crucial for internal client stability, external customer attraction and policy-exchange facilitation. In essence, internal client stability suggests restoring the credibility between institutional management and staff; external customer attraction requires more than beating the proverbial dead horse, that is, relying on repeated solicitation of institutional list of graduated students who may want to exercise the option of another institutional qualification-experience (often to the chagrin of disappointed marketers); and policy-exchange facilitation with governmental (even through institutional profession association) organizations and agencies that require some overhaul in its beaten paths (Brown & John, 1997).

Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim [1], Dr. Oo Yu Hock [2] and Joseph Adaikalam [3]

Therefore, it is recommended that there must be a closure to existing and often incremental false start-strong finish agenda-action and cold-storage respective practices that no longer enables meaningful and productive exchanges between IPTS/IPTA and MOE/MQA. This is important because closure does not mean failure (Bickerdyke et al., 2000); it suggests a willingness to dispense away with expired shelve-life and inactive issues and restart a more active engagement with more than just the IPTS/IPTA consortia to touch the subscribing public – particularly the paying clients of parents and students alike through a planned and coordinated series of technological engagements virtually. And WFH does in fact provide the actualization mechanism to achieve this purposive direction for civil servants to implement minus the politics of the day.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, **WFH** adopts the definition by the International Labour Organization (2020) which refers "uniquely to home-based working teleworking as a temporary, alternative working arrangement. It requires a share responsibility and commitment by both employers and workers to ensure business continuity and employment". '*iSOS*' (institutional Survival on Sustenance) and '*iSOWS*' (**institution Solutions of Winning Strategies**) are authors-original concepts meaning value-conserving and value-creating complementary platforms, without destroying the fundamental philosophical foundation of education per se and private education in particular. The point is that challenges of new normal culture in management from the WFH windows of education institutions can provide new vistas for exploring more innovative approaches to knowledge acquisition-discrimination, learning content-relevance, and industry-technology pertinence applications, provided the government especially the Ministry of Education and its agencies respond and act correspondingly with contingent flexibility that allows ORDERS (on-response demand executed reply solutions) to be applied immediately without the normal to-and-fro consultative processes of delayed lapses. The fundamental of education cannot be compromised, that is, education is the process, a continuous but life-long staggered knowledge acquisition-learning applications over time, circumstances and opportunities, within and outside the confines of organizational settings and throughout various modes and personalities of deliberate and voluntary deliveries that culminate in a formalized award of Certificates, Diplomas and Degrees attesting the achievement-performance results of successful completion of an approved course or program at committed level(s) of policy-endorsed progressive study. There may be compromises along the way by both institutions of private and public institutions of higher education, especially in challenging times of COVID-19 threats and restrictive online-subscribed self-dependent study of Work-from-Home. These may take numerous forms including better flexible allowances or options for retakes or resits of unsatisfactory or failed results at specified time and space (with no penalty or any other additional payments imposed) in accordance with 'temporary suspension of related-required institutional SOPs. This is, of course, the easier of the functional operation tasks that require the practical wisdom of internal institutional administration; but the more difficult policy-governance operation tasks that require compliance with regulatory-approved assessment framework based on risk-penalty enforcement by the external authority-approving government agency. The former, as an administrative-facilitating convenience and the latter, as quality-control necessity, are thus challenged to compromise an organizational business-continuity imperative and a governmental mechanism of regulatory-consistency imperative respectively.

The issue of compromise requires a 'give-and-take' consensus for mutual benefits, without the stigma of 'face loss' or the need to invoke political intervention against bureaucratic obstinacy. In this way, as a form of encouragement to perform better or to remedy inadvertent weakness to perform credibly, the process education progress and the spirit of knowledge learning-application represent a 'give-and-take' compromise that ensures the concessionary allowances do not undermine the quality of delivered

Dr. Asif Mahbub Karim [1], Dr. Oo Yu Hock [2] and Joseph Adaikalam [3]

programs, the credibility of certifications, and the professionalism of institutional compliance with policy-authority governance. This is of paramount importance because, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "any compromise on mere fundamentals is a surrender, for it is all give and take" whereas "all compromise is based on give and take" (cited source is anonymous). e of any action taken from the perspectives of policy interpretation-implementation engagements. In conclusion, in the public interest generally, and the progressive education-continuity of the students and potential learners and knowledge-seekers, it is necessary for the Ministry of Education and its agencies to review, re-evaluate, revise, modify, change and innovate a post-COVID portfolio of policy-organization culture on higher education demand-supply chain of IR4.0 perspectives and the digitalization applications of a compromised but practical onsite-offsite or online-offline delivery and certification of redefined pursuits of knowledge-learning share engagements domestically, regionally, internationally and globally.

References

1. Baker, S.R., Bloom, N., Davis, S.J., Terry, S.J. (2020). COVID-Induced Economic Uncertainty (No. 26983). Cambridge, Massachusetts: National Bureau of Economic Research.

2. Barrero, J.M., Bloom, N. and Davis, S.J. (2021). *Why Working from Home will Stick. California*, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR).

3. Berne, E. (2010). *Games People Play*. London: Penquin.

4. Bickerdyke, I., Lattimore, R. and Madge, A. (2000). *Business Failure and Change: An Australian Perspective.* Canberra: Productivity Commission.

5. Brown, John S. ed. (1997). *Seeing Differently: Insights on Innovation*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Book Series.

6. Hossain, M. I., Polas , M. R. H., Rahman, M. M., Islam, T., & Jamadar, Y. (2020). An Exploration of COVID-19 Pandemic and its Consequences on FMCG Industry in Bangladesh. *Journal of Management Info*, 7(3), 145-155. https://doi.org/10.31580/jmi.v7i3.1484

7. International Labour Organization (2020). *An Employers' Guide on Working from Home in Response to the Outbreak of COVID-19.* Geneva, Switzerland: ILO publications.

8. Schindehutte, M., Morris, M.H., and Pitt, L.F. (2009). *Rethinking Marketing: The Entrepreneurial Imperative*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.

9. *Williamson, P.J. and Zeng, M. (2009). Value-for-Money Strategies for Recessionary Times, Harvard Business Review, March 2009, pp. 67-74.*