

**Through Thick & Thin:  
A Case Study of an International School in a Global Pandemic**

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**Case Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Business Administration (Leadership)  
Universiti Tun Abdul Razak**

**October 2020**

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the case study is based on my original work except for quotations and citations that have been duly acknowledged. I also declare it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNIRAZAK) or other institution.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*In the name of Allah, the most gracious and the most merciful.*

First and foremost, all praises to Allah for his blessing and guidance that He has bestowed upon me throughout the whole process of completing this thesis.

It has been a challenging, but also very much a rewarding experience that I will forever cherish. Over the past two years, I have seen myself grow so much out of the MBA program - and finally able to complete the thesis is a huge achievement and satisfaction for me, both personally and academically. I am a strong believer that aside from the destination, the journey itself is a great teacher.

With that being said, I was not alone on this journey. My highest gratitude to my dear mentor and supervisor, Assoc. **Prof. Dr. Gazi Md Nurul Islam** for his relentless support for this whole time - and I can never do enough to repay that. It is my pleasure to take this opportunity to also thank all my lecturers. I am so humbled to be able to learn so much from all of you. Not to forget the wonderful people in the academic department and UNIRAZAK Graduate School of Business (GSB) especially **Mr. Abdul Rahman Omar Amiah** and **Mr. Azaim Alias**, thank you so much!

I would also like to express my greatest love and gratitude to both my parents - **Mohd Fadzly Shah Bin & Nor Shahriah Binti Abd Manan**, my fiancée - **Norhidayah Salleh**, my sister - **Batrisyia Naqiyah**, and my little brother - **Muhammad Afiq Hasran** for their undying support and encouragement.

Yours truly,

*Afiq*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case study is done on one of the largest international schools in Malaysia. The objective is to examine what are the impacts of Covid-19 on the academic well-being and operation of an international school.

As we are all aware, the current Covid-19 pandemic induced societal, health and economic disruption has resulted in potentially fundamental radical changes in how we live and work moving forward. This has caused tremendous economic dislocation and we are possibly on the threshold of a global depression that could be worse than the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Despite the gloomy macro and microeconomic picture, one particular sector of the Malaysian economy that really interests me is - **International schools**. I am currently working in one - which is why I chose to do the study as I believe that being part of the establishment itself, and had first-hand experience of how the school paddled through the pandemic provides me the depth I need to dissect this case. As a student of **Master Business in Administration** majoring in **Leadership**, it is very much interesting to see what goes behind all the important decision makings, especially under a tremendous amount of pressure. The school leadership faces a lot of challenges both external and internal - with so many stakeholders at stake - literally everyone from students, staff, teachers and also parents.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 What is the Backstory?

I remember, it was the second week of January 2020 when I suddenly had an influx of calls and emails from concerned parents about the safety of their children who were supposed to go to an international music festival in Shanghai in February. Apparently the first two cases of coronavirus were reported in Wuhan - That was the time when Malaysia was yet to fully anticipate a devastating pandemic, with such wrath coming our way.

To get ahead and the prudent need to propose necessary action to the school on whether or not we should send our students there, I first contacted the Malaysian Embassy in Beijing, and my enquiry was then redirected to the Malaysian Consulate in Shanghai. After rows of correspondence - emails, phone calls, our middle school Principal called off the trip in order to safeguard the well-being of students and teachers that were involved. It was such a heart-breaking news for most - but it was for the greater good.

Just before noon on 16 March 2020, all staff and teachers received an email from the Head of School, that effective the following day (17 March 2020) the school will now go on quarantine and students will be on virtual learning mode until further notice. That very same night, the first MCO was announced by the Prime Minister live on television and took everyone by surprise! It was a sleepless night, my brain just rapidly tried to picture what is going to happen the next day.

Not knowing what to expect, I punched-in earlier than usual the next morning, and we were all required to attend a briefing by the head of school that was followed by an ad-hoc speed-geeking session with the IT and technology director on working

remotely first thing in the morning. At that time, we learnt that we were all required to work remotely - as per the SOP set by the government. My department, we regrouped for a quick meeting, and just to process what was happening, and started listing things to do before the end of the day. Then it was all hectic! My fellow music assistant and teachers started scurrying and packing things up, to get ready to work and teach from home. Students came in to get their instruments and personal belongings from their lockers. We staff were then told to head over to the tech department and each get a laptop that was ready for us. Amidst the chaos - I can somehow sense that everything I did that morning wasn't spontaneous. I truly believed they were anticipating this to happen and already had contingencies ready to be deployed when necessary.

Later in the afternoon, we had a final department meeting, helped load things into each other's car, bid goodbye, and that marked the start of our journey of working and teaching from home.



## **1.2 Chronology of COVID-19 in Malaysia**

### **23rd January 2020**

The Ministry of Health through the Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre (CPRC) registered three cases of COVID-19, one (1) in Selangor and two (2) in Sabah. The 2 in Sabah were later tested negative

### **24th January 2020**

MOH reported 8 close contacts of the first positive-tested COVID-19 case in Singapore were in Johor Bahru and placed under quarantine.

### **25th January 2020**

Minister of Health at the time, Datuk Seri Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmad confirmed 3 confirmed cases involving Chinese tourists who travelled to Malaysia through Singapore on 23rd January 2020.

### **27th January 2020**

MOH had 26 hospitals all over the country to be on standby mode to handle COVID-19 cases that required further treatment.

### **29th January 2020**

MOH confirmed three (3) new cases, and Prime Minister at the time, Tun Dr. Mahathir issued a statement that Malaysia is getting ready to extract Malaysians back from Wuhan.

### **30th January 2020**

MOH confirmed 1 new case, and a humanitarian aid committee was established to bring home Malaysians who were stuck in Hubei, China due to the spread of the virus there. A joint committee was established between the National Agency for Disaster Management (NADMA) together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), MOH, Malaysian Royal Army (ATM) and National Security Council (MKN). Meanwhile in



Sabah, the state decided to temporarily suspend all scheduled flights from China to Sabah until further notice.

### **31st January 2020**

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a global health emergency.

### **11th February 2020**

The Malaysian and Singaporean government agreed to perform a joint committee that was led by deputy health ministers of both countries

### **27th February 2020**

The prime minister then, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad announced the Economy Stimulation Package 2020 to suppress the effect of the pandemic on the local economy.

### **12th March 2020**

9 new cases saw the cumulative cases in the country rise to 149. The WHO finally declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.

### **15th March 2020**

Malaysia saw a dramatic increase on the number of cases recorded daily - 190

### **16th March 2020**

125 new cases were reported where 95 of them are from the *perhimpunan tabligh* cluster in Masjid Sri Petaling. This is the day the prime minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin announced the first phase of the 14-days **Movement Control Order (MCO)** to commence on 18 March and end on 31 March.

### 1.3 Provisions of the 1st Movement Control Order (MCO)

1. **Complete restriction of movement and assembly nationwide**, including religious activities, sports, social and cultural events. To enforce this restriction, all houses of worship and business premises are to be closed, except supermarkets, public markets, sundry shops and convenience stores selling essential goods. Specifically, for Muslims, the suspension of all religious activities in mosques and Suraus, including the Friday prayers
2. **A complete travel restriction for all Malaysians going overseas**. For Malaysians returning home, they are required to undergo health checks and voluntary self-quarantine for a period of fourteen days.
3. **A complete restriction of foreign visitors and tourists** into Malaysia.
4. **Closure of all kindergartens, public and private schools**, including day schools and residential schools, international schools, Tahfiz centers and all other institutions of learning in primary, secondary and pre-university levels.
5. **Closure of all public and private institutions of higher learning nationwide**, including skills training institutes.
6. **Closure of all government and private premises except those involved in essential services** (Water, electricity, energy, telecommunications, post, transportation, irrigation, oil, gas fuel, lubricants, broadcasting, finance, banking, health, pharmacy, fire prevention, prisons, ports, airports, security, defense, cleaning, food supply & retail)

## 1.4 Problem Recognition

From the start of the pandemic, UNESCO released a report on March 4th 2020 highlighting that almost 300 million students around the globe had their privilege of going to school retracted because governments everywhere are issuing school closure in order to contain the spread of the virus.

Basilaia & Kvavadze quoted a study by Uscher-Pines et al., which describes - “During an evolving influenza pandemic, community mitigation strategies, such as social distancing, can slow down virus transmission in schools and surrounding communities. To date, research on school practices to promote social distancing in primary and secondary schools has focused on prolonged school closure, with little attention paid to the identification and feasibility of other more sustainable interventions” (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020 as cited in Uscher-Pines et al., 2018). The study basically concluded that there is just not enough information or precedents for schools (and other education institutions) to formulate effective SOPs and guidelines on to resume their operation as needed - thus additional researches are definitely required on this subject.

According to an article in the Business Today Magazine published on April 27th 2020, ISC Research’s Market Intelligence Report for Malaysia, the total number of English-medium international schools in the country have risen by more than 70% since 2012, and student enrolments have also gone up by more than 85%. In 2018, at least 12 new international schools kick-started their operations in this country. For 2020, it is estimated that there are now approximately 80,000 students studying in international schools. That is a big number, and it would be important to understand how the pandemic affect these students.

Despite the name 'international school', someone would expect that all international schools have mostly international students - that is not necessarily true. That may vary based on where the schools are located. According to the same article, about 80% of students attending international schools today are locals. Their parents hope their children will obtain "*English centric education and a leg up in the future*".

Since the start of the first Movement Control Order (MCO) announced by the Malaysian government, all schools in the country have been instructed to close. However, private and international schools (due to the socio-economic properties of their clientele) have been going on full virtual learning. Despite various arguments, they had no option but to jump on that bandwagon although it is not, and never will be a replacement for on-campus learning. Global experts have been advocating blended learning for years which is the combination of face-to-face learning, 2-way learning online via video conferencing tools as well as online lectures, webinars, podcasts and other digitized material.

There have also been arguments and refutation especially among parents - in regards the fees. Different schools have different ways of managing the affair - some provide discounts, some provide payment extension and installment, some both. The question here - can all schools accommodate such needs? What about schools which are run by non-profit organizations?

## 1.5 Asking the ‘Big Research Questions’

“How does an international school survive through a global pandemic?”

When we talk about a school - people tend to always think mostly about the academic side of things. However, when we talk about **international schools**, we should keep in mind that while they provide academic programmes, the nature of their operation also involves a proper structure of management and leadership. Although they can be either profit or non-profit - most of the time they are being operated in a businesslike manner. Another important point to note is that they have students across many nationalities - which poses unique challenges that may not usually faced by local schools. This is why this case study is important - we will analyse on the how, what, and why - given the external circumstances, **how decisions were made by key people in the school** and **how did those decisions impact the school’s operation.**

This study will incorporate both the aspect of **academics** and **business management** in all sections of discussions, including data collections and data analysis. Let’s dive into what are we going to look at in the study;

### 1.5.1 Research Questions

1. How does virtual learning affect the teaching and learning process of in an international school?
2. How does staff work-from-home (WFH) affect the operational side of an international school?
3. How does an international school cope with the strict regulations of re-opening and what were the challenges of bringing in new hires from overseas?
4. What are the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on students and their families?

### **1.5.2 Objective of the Case Study**

1. To determine how virtual learning affects teaching and learning process of an international school?
2. To examine the impacts of staff working from home on the operation of an international school?
3. To understand how an international school copes with strict regulations of re-opening and what were the challenges of bringing in new hires from overseas
4. To examine the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on students and their families

### **1.5.3 Contributions of the study**

This study aims to be a precedent for future research in this area, practically speaking for international schools in Malaysia. The global pandemic is something that we do not usually see every day, and COVID-19 has proven to be much more severe than the ones we had in recent years.

Hopefully from the findings and discussions, future researchers will be able to set a baseline on how a pandemic affects the operation of an international school and what were the mitigations put in place to suppress those impacts, what decisions were called, and why.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Industry Overview**

In an article published by Relocate Global on October 19th 2020, the increasing number of multinational companies now based in Malaysia, including Nestlé, Hewlett Packard and KPMG, had caused a significant increase the number of expatriates into the country to fill senior-level positions - and when they relocate to Malaysia, they will of course bring along their families. With their level of jobs and higher brackets of income they tend to have a high standard of schooling for their children, hence the demand for international schools is intense

The article also highlighted a report by LEK Consulting Global Education Practice, Malaysia's Klang Valley, an area that covers Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding cities and towns, accounts for almost half (45%) of the private K-12 (kindergarten to 12th grade) market and is expected to grow much faster than the rest of Malaysia in the upcoming five years. To date, there are more than 50,000 students studying in international schools in this region. The international curriculum has been catapulting this growth, and has since increased by around 8%.

However, the country has experienced some expatriate departures, mainly from within the oil and gas industry. This has created availability of places at some premium international schools, which offer excellent education opportunities for international families.

Increasing numbers of local Malaysian children are now attending the country's international schools. In 2012, Malaysia's government removed a 40 per cent limit that had restricted many local children. This change in policy, as well as other government regulations (such as the requirement for Malaysian national schools to deliver maths and science in Bahasa Malaysia), has paved the way for a substantial increase in demand from local students enrolling at international schools.

These factors have resulted in a major change in the size and demographic of Malaysia's international-schools market. According to ISC Research's Market Intelligence Report for Malaysia, the total number of English-medium international schools in the country has increased by 75 per cent since 2012, and student enrolment has increased by 87 per cent. A further 12 new international schools opened in the 2018/19 academic year, according to figures outlined by ISC Research at their 2019 conference.

The greatest influence on change has been from Malaysian students. Approximately 50 percent of all international-school students in Malaysia are now locals. For this reason, several schools are expanding their campuses to respond to the demand, and more schools are opening.

Some well-known school brands include Marlborough College Malaysia, which opened in 2012, the UK's Epsom College that opened Epsom College in Malaysia (ECiM) in 2014 and Gems International School in Subang Jaya, which opened in 2016.

Kuala Lumpur, which currently has 22 per cent of Malaysia's international schools, is home to the vast majority of its premium international schools. The Alice Smith School, established in 1946, was the first British International School in Malaysia. It teaches the British national curriculum to students from more than 50 different nationalities. The school operates on a 'not for profit' basis which means that all the revenue from school fees is used to invest in student education and developing the quality of the school's facilities and resources.

Marlborough College Malaysia is the first independent, British boarding and day school to open a campus in Malaysia. The Preparatory School takes pupils from age three and the Senior School includes a Sixth Form up to age 18.

A spokesperson says, "Pupils entering Marlborough College Malaysia join a community steeped in the tradition of placing compassion, companionship and





conversation at the heart of its educational philosophy and a history, spanning over 170 years, of holistic education and academic excellence.”


## **2.2 Kuala Lumpur as an Education Hub**




Kuala Lumpur is the base for Education City, one of Malaysia’s two education hubs. The second hub, EduCity, is located in Iskandar. Both will provide high-quality, internationally oriented education for all ages, including a selection of universities. EduCity is home to Newcastle University Medical Malaysia, the University of Southampton Malaysia, the University of Reading Malaysia, Marlborough College Malaysia, the Netherlands Maritime Institute of Technology, Raffles University Iskandar, and Raffles American School. Education City includes Epsom College in Malaysia and Universiti Sains Malaysia Global Campus.

The education hubs have been established not only to attract more skilled expatriates to the country, but also to increase options for local citizens. The intention is to reduce emigration by Malaysians who, until recently, have been moving overseas for an improved standard of education.

## 2.3 Business Competition

<p><b>Australian International School Malaysia (AISM)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offers Australian education facilitated by qualified teachers, mostly Australian trained and experienced.</li> <li>• For children starting from the age 3 (pre-school) to age 18 (pre-university) housed in Junior, Middle and Senior Schools</li> <li>• Located in Seri Kembangan</li> <li>• Average fee: RM10,176.00 - RM28,296.00 per annum</li> </ul>
<p><b>IGB International School (IGBIS)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Owned and managed by Detik Harapan Sdn Bhd, a sub-company of IGB Corporation Berhad</li> <li>• IGBIS is the only school in Malaysia that offer a complete International Baccalaureate (IB) course - Primary Years Programme (PYP), the Middle Years Programme (MYP), the Diploma Programme (DP), and the Career-related Programme (CP)</li> <li>• Located in Sungai Buloh</li> <li>• Average fee: RM27,000.00 - RM95,800.00 per annum</li> </ul>

<p><b>Kolej Tuanku Ja'afar (KTJ)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides premier British both day and boarding education for children as young as 3 years old to 19 years old</li> <li>• Offers Cambridge and Edexcel curriculum through Primary, Secondary and A-levels</li> <li>• Located in Mantin, Negeri Sembilan</li> <li>• Average fee: RM13,980.00 - RM77,280 per annum</li> </ul>
<p><b>Alice Smith School</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established in 1946, it provides British education under the auspices of a non-profit organisation.</li> <li>• It caters to 3 - 18 years old, offering I(GCSEs) and A-levels</li> <li>• Has two main campuses, Kuala Lumpur &amp; Seri Kembangan</li> <li>• Average fee: RM23,140.00 - RM31,100.00 per annum</li> </ul>
<p><b>The British International School Kuala Lumpur</b></p>  <p><b>THE BRITISH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL KUALA LUMPUR</b> A NORD ANGLIA EDUCATION SCHOOL</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A part of the Nord Anglia Education branding, one of the most prominent association with 55 international schools located in 24 countries around the world</li> <li>• Offers the National Curriculum from Early Years to 6th Form. Ages range from 2-16</li> <li>• Located in Petaling Jaya</li> <li>• Average fee: RM45,600 - RM99,970 per annum</li> </ul>

<p><b>Garden International School</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● It's the largest British international school in Malaysia</li> <li>● Provides British-based education (National Curriculum for England &amp; Wales) through their Early Years Centre, Primary School (Year 1 to Year 6) and Secondary School (Year 7 to Year 13)</li> <li>● Has 2 campuses; Desa Sri Hartamas and Mont Kiara</li> <li>● Average fee: RM15,070.00 - RM32,820.00 per annum</li> </ul>
<p><b>King Henry VIII College</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A British international school that has both day and boarding modes</li> <li>● Offers primary, secondary, early years and A-level studies for students aged from 3 to 18 years old</li> <li>● Located in Cyberjaya</li> <li>● Average fee: RM15,000.00 - RM80,000 per annum</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mon't Kiara International School (M'KIS)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Established in 1994, the school is rated a 5-Star school by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, and caters mostly for expatriate families</li> <li>● Provides North American Curriculum from preschool to grade 12.</li> <li>● Located in Mont Kiara</li> <li>● Average fee: RM24,205.00 - RM55,414.00</li> </ul>

## **2.4 Challenges Faced by Schools during the MCO**

### **2.4.1 Virtual Learning**

When the outbreak started, no establishments, companies or organizations managed to escape the impact, and it is anticipated that the longer it goes, the more severe the impacts. Schools in general, be it local, private or international - took a hard beating when they were one of the first establishments to be closed down in order to safeguard the health and safety of our kids.

When schools close down, children are robbed of their privilege to growth and advancement. According to UNESCO, the impacts are more severe for impoverished learners if they keep on not having access to educational resources. (UNESCO, 2020)

A journal article recently published in Saudi Arabia also discussed that assisting children to learn from home (virtual or non-virtual) is a daunting task for parents especially if they are still required to work in-office, and when they do not have the necessary knowledge and tools. Marginalized, at-risk, or abandoned children are more inclined to not leave school when closures are finished, and the impact may be a life-long limitation through missed chances ((Tanveer, Bhaumik, Hassan, & UI Haq, 2020)

During the outbreak, classes that were previously conducted by the face to face method in the classroom abruptly shifted to the virtual learning system. The physical distancing requires everyone to stay home so that the spread of this virus is not expanding. This requires both teachers and students are expected to stay at home and still carry out their duties and responsibilities. Creative and innovative, lecturers are required to keep teaching to keep students informed of proper education and teaching. Through the use of E-Campus applications and other applications, teachers / lecturers continue to perform teaching tasks by interacting online with students. That interaction by inputting lecture materials into e-campus applications, providing assignments, online discussions, and review of the learning process.

## **Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning Policy - CHINA**

China for example, introduced the policy called *Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning* - which basically means the need to transition from offline teaching to virtual learning at home. As described in the official guideline released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the policy aims to “*integrate national and local school teaching resources, provide rich, diverse, selectable, high-quality online resources for all students across the country, and support teachers’ online teaching and children’s online learning*” (Zhang, Wang, Yang, & Chuanyi, 2020). It sparked some furious debates on whether or not such policy is viable enough to substitute offline teaching and also whether there will be a proportional relationship between quality of education and productivity, against the extra workload that has to be borne by both teachers and students.

It was also described that transitioning into virtual learning is an organic and dynamic process constituting several core activities;

1. Integrating national resources and planning at the top-level.
2. Training the teachers
3. Enabling local authorities and schools to carry out virtual learning in-line with local conditions
4. Formulating new standard operating procedures should the country are ready to go back to offline learning to ensure a smooth transition
5. Working out a plan for school-reopening

However, things are often easier said than done. Despite all the detailed planning and rigorous steps taken, the Chinese government still came across several difficulties;

1. Virtual learning is constrained by infrastructure - large-scale teaching tend to 'jam' the online platforms which resulted in frequent network malfunctions
2. It is a big challenge to promote and maintain an efficient use of online teaching resources - most of the online courses made ready were previously used only as supplementary materials for offline learning.
3. Quality of virtual learning seemed to depend a lot on the teachers' online teaching skills and experience.
4. There are a wide range of distractions for both teachers and students at home - house chores, childcare, lack of proper internet connection and unable to set-up a proper space for learning / teaching.

## **JRC Technical Report - EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

The Joint Research Committee of the European Commission published a report in the early 2020 underlining the prolonged impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and they were extensive in the aspect of school closure and virtual learning. Below points are **quoted from the report** (Di Pietro, Karpinski, Costa, & Mazza, 2020);

### **1) Less time spent in learning**

*For children, most of their learning happens in school. Therefore, school closure which forces everyone to shift from on-campus learning to virtual learning may cause them to spend less time on actual learning. According to the Schul-Barometer (School Barometer) survey, which took place from 25 March until 5 April 2020 and was targeted at Austrian, Swiss and German students aged between 10 and 19 years, students' weekly learning time during the COVID-19 MCO is reduced by between 4 and 8 hours, compared to when schools are open. Additionally, one in five students says that they study less than 9 hours per week.*

## **2) Stress Symptoms**

*Students who are confined within the walls of their home during the pandemic tend to develop excessive stress and anxiety. Sprang and Silman (2013) show that children who were isolated or quarantined during pandemic diseases are more likely to suffer from acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and grief. Such adverse psychological factors may in turn have a detrimental effect on learning (Kuban and Steele 2011).*

## **3) Changes in the Way of Interaction**

*According to the report, scientific evidence supported the claim that a conducive school environment has a positive impact on a student's achievements through peer effects - physically being in a classroom will allow students to interact with their classmates which have significant impacts on their social growth. Peer effects on the other hand, has different mechanisms in channeling positive impacts to students, for instance; teaching each other, healthy competitions to motivate them to achieve more. At the same time, experts believe that students can develop important social skills at a very young age through in-class activities which will carry long term impacts on their social growth. They will definitely not have such privilege if they keep on learning virtually.*

## **4) Lack of Motivation**

*The governments of several countries (e.g. Spain, Italy) have announced that, due to COVID-19, students will not have to repeat the school year regardless of their performance while studying remotely. France has prohibited the use of assessment results in the formal evaluation of the "Brevet" (lower secondary school exam) and of the "Baccalaureate" (upper secondary school exam). Although this could be a fair decision (Sonnemann 2020), several studies suggest that students may be more externally motivated to learn if they know that their learning will be assessed. For instance, Elikai and Schuhmann (2010) conclude that grades can motivate students to learn. Austin (1978) finds that homework that was assigned and checked turns out to be more effective in improving students' achievement than homework that was assigned, but not checked.*



## 2.4.2 Faculty & Staff Work-From-Home (WFH)

At times, it has always been a dream for employees to have that flexibility of working from home - having their own space, flexible working hours while getting the same job done. Waking up in the morning wondering - "Why do I have to spend hours in traffic just to get to the office, turn on and do my work on the computer while I can do the same thing on my computer at home?" Well, now that we are in a global pandemic everyone is required to work from home unless you are a front liner or essential service worker.

A recently published journal by a group of scholars from universities in Indonesia outlined both sides of the coins - the positive and negative impact of working from home for teachers, which also applies to staff of an education institution, specifically in respect to the current global pandemic. They based their study on the recent policy introduced by the Indonesian government where they implemented Work from Home work systems for schools and universities. The initiative is a result of a press conference that took place in Bogor Palace, Indonesia where the President appealed to the people that they can all minimize the spread of the virus if they work, study, and worship from home (Purwanto, et al., 2020) & (Crawford, et al., 2020).

<b>POSITIVE</b>	<b>NEGATIVE</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. WFH provides extra flexibility when it comes to task completion - teachers can take full of responsibility in getting the job done</li><li>2. Always able to get a breath of fresh air - switching working spaces from the living room, bedroom, dining room, balcony etc.</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. There's a risk of some losing the motivation to work due to lack of a conducive working environment that they can only get in classrooms, and also distraction by social media, house chores, childcare etc.</li><li>2. Vulnerability of mental health when pushing too hard, too much</li></ol>

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. There's usually no requirement to follow the exact working hours</li> <li>4. You save in transportation cost that incur when you have to travel to work</li> <li>5. At the same, you can minimize the stress level from working in an office environment, as well as the additional stress from being stuck in traffic</li> <li>6. Less stress may equal to more productivity - higher efficiency</li> <li>7. More time for the family, in the comfort and security of your own home</li> </ol>	<p>distraction at home.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Chance of increasing electricity and internet cost due to continuous use.</li> <li>4. Data security issues especially when teachers are using shared/public network</li> <li>5. Security risks - for teachers whose home-sharing may need to ensure all document and laptop are locked when not in use</li> </ol>
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Another recent article published in the British Journal of Management supported the stand that working at home is very challenging for everyone. Juggling between work and home chores, some have to assist their children who are on virtual learning, navigating other responsibilities has blurred the lines between work-life and home-life which led to longer, inconsistent working hours and thus, much greater stress (Brammer & Clark, 2020).

On another note, despite the fact that when we talk about 'school', generally people tend to only imagine two key players - teachers and students. But do not forget, in the case of private schools - especially international schools, the management and support systems are huge. The school that I work in, we have more than 200 staff working for the school in various roles. We have KPIs and expectations just like in other industries.

### **2.4.3 School Reopening & Arrival of new Faculty**

In the first quarter of 2020, generally schools all over the world began to be closed due to the alarming rate of infection of COVID-19. From North America to Europe, from the Middle East to Asia, schools and universities had no choice but to transition into virtual learning. Around 3-4 months after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, some countries emerged and got the pandemic under control. They started to see a declining trend in numbers of active and new cases, which prompted the governments to start looking and formulating SOPs and guidelines to gradually open some sectors of their economic and social services - which include schools.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) produced a document containing frameworks of school reopening - and recommended that schools only reopen with clear physical distancing guidelines setup. This ranges from prohibiting activities that involve mass gatherings, staggering the start and end of the school day and break times; and to reducing class sizes. Schools are also advised to have specific SOPs to be deployed in case a student or staff member is not well.

#### **Malaysia**

At the time of this study, Malaysian schools are nearing the third months of school reopening. All schools from regardless of their status - local, private, international - must all adhere to models laid out by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In addition, students, teachers and staff must religiously follow the SOPs and guidelines underlined by the ministry, such as 1-metre distancing (some schools even went up to 1.5 meters), temperature checks at all entry points, mask-wearing and hand sanitizer stations. Should anyone record a temperature higher than 37.5°C, or the person displays symptoms of COVID-19, they will not be allowed to enter the school premises.

## **Singapore**

Singapore is actually one of the few countries who stretched the latest closure of schools and they were closed for just out for about a month, before reopened in May. Generally, they deployed several phases of reopening with Phase 1 to allow just 50% of schools to reopen

Phase 2 then allows all students to attend school as per normal schedule, with similar SOPs and guidelines deployed in Malaysia. Seating arrangements involve 1-metre spacing, only forward facing in order to minimize contacts, corridors and hallways are now a one-way route. Schools were then gradually allowed to re-introduce group activities and sports that require little to none contact.

## **Vietnam**

Schools in Vietnam were reopened gradually starting early May, and just like Malaysia and Singapore, all students, teachers and staff are obliged to follow all SOPs and guidelines religiously such as wearing face masks / face shields and have their temperature recorded daily at every entry point.

The regulations also require no more sharing of tools / equipment / appliances and disinfectants must be applied daily. Seating arrangements are set to ensure physical distance and schools now practice lunch break rotations to minimize the number of students at the canteen at the same time. The government prohibited activities that involve large group gatherings, as well as sport activities.

## **The UK**

The government issued a document titled “Guidance For Full Opening: Schools” on July 2nd. It outlined all the SOPs and guidelines for all schools and nurseries for them to get ready before re-opening. The basic matters are identical as per the countries discussed earlier.

For an international school in Malaysia (*including the one I am currently working for*), school reopening is a very challenging process because aside from the rigorous SOPs that they have to adhere to, they also have to face some variables that are only unique to them - students stranded overseas, families relocating back to their home countries, and also getting newly hired teachers into the country. These variables will be analyzed and discussed through first-hand perspectives in the next chapter.

#### 2.4.4 Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic proves itself a force to be reckoned with. Single-handedly paralyzes almost all economies in the world - and Malaysia is one of the many victims of its wrath. When the pandemic hits, what made the impacts more severe was that the new government just came into power and the country is already suffering the economic repercussions caused by that maneuver. We are talking about huge debts, funding shortfalls, plummeting prices of oil and now we are also enduring the knock-on effects on international trade and tourism caused by the pandemic. From the aspect of pandemic management, the Malaysian government is recognized as a top 5 in the world - one of the best countries that effectively managed the local spread of the virus

However, from the aspect of economics - we literally and figuratively got a knock-out blow from the pandemic. The country 'dived' in nose-first into the horrifying effects of an economic collapse - loss of jobs, pay cuts, disruption of livelihoods, and much more amplified impacts are faced by the underprivileged, those who do not have any strong safety net to fall back on.

The government was indeed proactive in inducing economic support to the citizens such as when they introduced the Prihatin Rakyat economic stimulus package to cushion some of the impacts on the people. In a nation-wide broadcast, the Prime Minister stated that "No one gets left behind.". The package was announced in March 2020, while a more extensive stimulus package for SMEs was then introduced in April 2020. To quote a report by the International Labor Organization (ILO), "*The key challenge, however, is how the different measures will be delivered to reach those most in need and whether they will provide the expected relief in the immediate term and stimulate the economy and employment to 'recover better' in the longer term.*"

However, when we discuss international schools - regardless the aspect, a fact remains that you cannot take out 'expatriates' from the context. By definition, the term expatriate is a designation for high-skilled foreigners who reside in Malaysia under *the*

*Employment Pass and their dependents under the Dependent Pass or Long-Term Social Visit Pass.* The reason why this is so important is that basically (in the case my school) 95% of the teachers and most of the parents are expatriates!

On the other side of the coin, the BPN or Prihatin economic stimulus package has little to none support for foreign workers. In an FAQ released by the Ministry of Human Resources, they stated “*if a lay-off is inevitable, foreign employees should be terminated first*”

On a larger scale, it applies to *all* migrant and foreign workers where they are also constituted of the lower-skilled workers - they tend to have lower levels of education and earn at least a minimum wage in comparison to average Malaysians. Without any support - the socio-economic impacts are much more severe for them (Lin, 2020).

Going back into the context of the study, expatriates are also not excluded from the impacts. Many parents are laid-off or had their pay cut, which forces them to relocate back to their countries - and this then impacted the school in-terms a dropping rate of enrolment. Some stay, but have to bear losing a huge chunk of their income, and still need to pay for school.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

To recap, the aim of this case study is to examine how an international school prevails through a global pandemic from both the academic as well as the management and leadership perspectives. For this study, I have selected an international school that is to be kept anonymous as per their request. I selected this school because of several reasons;

1. I personally have been working here for at least a year at the time of this writing.
2. This school is one of the premier and oldest international schools in Malaysia with a large number of staff, students and teachers both local and international
3. I have the first-hand experience of how the school was navigated throughout the period of the pandemic - starting from the very first MCO up to the time when the school reopened.
4. I can get access to the key decision makers for the school - who can provide extensive and in-depth insights for the case questions.
5. With them knowing me personally, I anticipate that the interview session will be much more casual and natural - they will be comfortable in their responses and me having a strong grip on those responses because I can definitely relate to them.



### **3.1 About the School**

The international school in study is a co-educational, private, not-for-profit school responsible for having an account of over 1,800 students aged 3-18 years per academic year, which falls into either elementary, middle and high school.

It provides an organic international curriculum which combines the prominent North American educational syllabus with global driven content. The curriculum recognizes that students are on a lifelong learning journey and is driven by its mission to challenge each student to “Be All You Are” and develop the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding to become a highly successful, spirited, socially responsible global citizen.

The school offers a range of high-quality, transdisciplinary pathways that enable every learner to choose the curriculum best suited to their abilities, interests, and aspirations. High School students have even more choice this year with two innovative academic options, PRAXIS 2030 (Grade 9 and 10) and the Pursuits Program (Grade 11 and 12) added to the curriculum. Both focus on enhancing student agency and self-directed learning. Students in Grade 11 and 12 also have the option of taking the prestigious International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) that it has offered since the 1980s. As one of the longest running World IB Schools in Malaysia, the school has seen more than 1,400 students graduate with an IB Diploma over the past 28 years, representing a ninety-six percent pass rate. This flexibility creates further education opportunities with the students receiving acceptances from leading universities worldwide.

The school is accredited internationally through the Council of International Schools (CIS), and in the United States through the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). It has a strong focus on service and sustainability across its divisions and is a member of the Eco-Schools organization and the Green Schools Alliance.

## 3.2 Sampling & Data Collection Method

### 3.2.1 Sampling

For this study, 3 respondents were selected and they are:

1. **Head of School - R1**
2. **Middle School Principal - R2**
3. **High School Vice Principal - R3**

As explained in the previous chapters, this study aims to look at how an international school prevails through a global pandemic and we will examine it from **academic, management, and leadership** perspectives - which explains why the 3 respondents were selected. The Head of School is at the top of the school's hierarchy of power and decision-making, which is then followed by principals and vice principals as the second-top horizontal line. They initiate, are involved, and have the say in all decisions made in the school. They have both the broad spectrum and depth of knowledge that is very essential for this study.

In order to gain access to these key people, I first sought advice from the Culture, Staff & Talent Development department of the school - on whether I need any specific clearance and legal disclosures to do the interviews, as well as what are the procedures I need to adhere to.

All interviews are done in the month of October 2020, and within the school's operating hours with each session scheduled at least one and a half week in advance because the interviewees have super-packed schedules especially during this uncertain pandemic period.

Each interview session lasted between 30 - 40 mins, with audio recordings for the purpose of reference in doing the analysis and to ensure accuracy and credibility of the data. Request of consent for audio recording was included in the interview invitation emails, and all three respondents provided verbal consent before the start of the interview session.

All three respondents were asked the same set of questions, in order to have a clear frame for analysis. The set consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions, and the interviewer did not interrupt nor lead any response at all.

### **3.2.2 Data Collection Method**

This study utilizes **face-to-face interview** as the primary method of data collection. Questionnaires are derived from the research problem and research questions discussed in the first chapter. Below is the list of questions for the interviews

#### **Virtual Learning**

1. How was the student participation like in virtual learning in comparison to physical classes?
2. In terms of IT knowledge, did students transition well into virtual learning?
3. What were critical challenges faced by teachers in virtual learning?
4. Are extra-cocurricular activities feasible to be done virtually?

### **Staff Work-from-home**

1. How was the transition like - from working on-campus to working remotely / from home?
2. Did WFH pose any negative impact on faculty and staff productivity?
3. Did virtual communication (Google Meet, Skype, Gmail, WhatsApp) affect the quality of communication among faculty and staff, and caused any difficulties in task execution or decision making?
4. Considering the worst-case-scenario where movement control order is reinstated, do you believe that we are ready to WFH again?

### **School Re-opening and Arrival of New Faculty**

1. How does the school adapt to the new regulations and SOPs set by the MOE and what are the impacts they pose on our daily operations as a school - physical classes, after school activities, music concerts, sports events etc.
2. How do students adapt to the new normal, are they adapting well and are there any specific challenges?
3. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?
4. How did the school welcome and orient the new faculty members, while still maintaining and embracing the new norm?

## **Socio-economic Impacts**

1. How would you perceive the socio-economic impacts of this pandemic on our students and families?
2. How did the school provide support to our students and their families WITH the main idea to ensure that students can still attend school?
3. How would you describe the current state of enrolment while taking into context, a global pandemic?
4. What would be the best strategy moving forward, to sustain / improve the situation?

### 3.3 Data Analysis Method

For analysis & discussion, we will dive deep into each of the interviews, and try to detect a pattern of any similarities or differences that we can dig out from them. If there are any differences, we will analyze in what context they differ from. Also, in order to guide and shape discussion, this study will utilize two frameworks as guidelines in analyzing and discussion for the last chapter, as well as understanding the responses provided by our respondents. The two are:

**i) Framework for Resilient Leadership in Crisis Situation** - This framework is adopted from a publication titled "*Crisis Leadership and Resilience*" published last year by a joint research team from Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNIRAZAK), Permodalan Nasional Berhad (PNB) and Yayasan Tun Ismail (YTI). This framework is essential in understanding the dynamics of decision making in a global crisis - in this case, the pandemic, of course.

Professor Nicholas H. Barker in this book outlined a model called "*Resilient Leadership*" In his discussion, he describes the three (3) ideas that we must have a firm grasp on - *crisis, crisis decision-making and resilience*.

➤ **Crisis**

- Referred to as a time of acute difficulty or danger, usually sudden, unexpected, and at times, uncontrollable. This is a decisive moment, a turning point, and the outcome is uncertain.

➤ **Crisis Decision-making**

- A decision is described as a judgement between alternative courses of action. Making decisions in a crisis, is totally a whole different avenue - time is of the essence, information is fragmented and incomplete, and if the situation is also an emergency, the immediate goal is survival.

➤ **Resilience**

- Resilience is the ability to absorb a severe shock and recover quickly. Both elements - withstanding shock (robustness) and rapid recovery are important.

**Characteristics of Resilient Leadership**

1. Accept Reality
2. Take responsibility
3. Self-efficacy
4. Meaning & purpose
5. Improvisation

**ii) Framing Crisis Management** - Framing refers to the 'communicative process, which occurs when people create foreground and background distinctions during their definitions of what is going on in a situation. Framing is important in crisis management as it is the means by which people construct the context of the crisis situation and make their decisions.

**SWOT Analysis** - *A SWOT analysis evaluates the internal strengths and weaknesses, and the external opportunities and threats in an organization's environment (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015).* This study will utilize this tool to rectify resources, capabilities, core competencies, and competitive advantages inherent to the school.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

#### **4.1 Story Time!**

Let us dive deep into the responses of our three respondents - they are very much insightful to not only seek the answers we want for this case, but we also get to view things from their perspective!

##### **4.1.1 Interview 1 - Head of School (R1)**

#### **Q1a. How was the student participation like in virtual learning in comparison to physical classes?**

Students did really a good job in virtual learning. It allows them to re-establish their relationship with each other, because on-campus the friend groups are already established. But when they do it virtually, that allows them to 'break' and 'reform' in a certain way. Also, it allows introverts to learn better. Extroverts may miss being out and about but introverts may find it's easier for them to commit to virtual learning. Some of the shy students felt that the anonymity in virtual learning is beneficial to them - they can get assistance from their teachers virtually, send private messages whereas in a physical class environment, everything is public. For instance, they may need to raise their hands in class should they need any assistance or questions - for shy students it makes them vulnerable and self-aware that they need help and as if they are slower than other students. On many fronts, it was beneficial.

It evokes teachers to be more targeted and decide what is the most important content to teach instead of 'let's teach everything!'. Hence, how do we carve it down to the most essential teaching. This is something that we carried on even after the MCO was lifted because we are now focusing on what's essential.



### **1b. In terms of IT knowledge, did students transition well into virtual learning?**

Our students' IT skills are exceptional. The challenges are more for younger students (lower elementary) - those aged 4 and 5 years old. It's hard for them to connect and stay focused, so their parents had to be around. On the other hand, virtual learning works really well for students in grade 5 and above, those in the middle and high school. At the same time, it's not to be said that virtual learning is a replacement for physical learning on campus because social relationships are important. However, a possible way to integrate virtual learning is possibly a blend between the two. For instance, many of our students come to campus every day, but teachers still prepare screencasts, recorded tutorials and explanations so kids can review this material anytime. If they missed anything, the teacher will not have to repeat it in front of the class many times. Also, it is important to note that these videos (materials) are different from the standardized video tutorials that are commonly used globally for a specific subject / topic because although its pre-recorded, students are still hearing their own teacher, with their own lesson - it's very personalized. This may be the future of learning where students can access learning materials virtually, while still attending their classes physically.

### **1c. What were critical challenges faced by teachers in virtual learning?**

The challenges for teachers may be isolation - being away from fellow teachers, away from their students. They also have kids at home. So just imagine, they have kids at home who are also on virtual learning, while they are teaching virtual classes and at the same time has to keep an eye on their kids!

### **1d. Are extra-cocurricular activities feasible to be done virtually?**

Anything activities that are related to competitions are the most affected - as it involves collaboration / contact with other schools. However, we still did activities such as music, drama, sports virtually. Is it the same experience? Not quite, but at least we are still keeping our students engaged. For example, we had athletic / sport activities done remotely among them - pushup challenges, skip rope challenges and etc. The same goes to performing arts students. They record their dances at home, we had virtual choir and many other activities done virtually. It may not be the same if done physically, but instead of canceling events, we kind of reshaped it to suit the situation.

### **2a. How was the transition like - from working on-campus to working remotely / from home?**

We did very well to transition to working remotely. Well before the first MCO was announced, we were getting ready - we looked at every department, and if we have to close the campus and work remotely for an extended period of time, what would each department need? Every aspect of school is listed in a document where we identified what can work the same way, and what needs to work differently. For example, how do we get signatures / approvals remotely and how can we automate some processes for those approvals. Our wonderful IT & Technology team looked at what are the essential needs for staff to work remotely - we prepared that in advance so that in the case that we need to close school, we shift to work remotely just within a snap of a finger. The challenge is of course to identify what are those essential needs for our staff to work remotely. For example, not all staff have laptops or may suffer from bad internet coverage at home.

## **2b. Did WFH pose any negative impact on faculty and staff productivity?**

Generally, the school did not face any disruption of productivity among our staff because when we work remotely, we have limitations on what we can do. This is very much understandable especially staff whose job scopes involve mostly physical activities.

## **2c. Did virtual communication (Google Meet, Skype, Gmail, WhatsApp) affect the quality of communication among faculty and staff, and caused any difficulties in task execution or decision making?**

In many ways, people read better and listen better when they do so, remotely. However, it's different because people miss being with each other. We are missing a lot of aspects of a connection - the laughter, jokes made that can elevate you, make you feel good - they are just not there. On a bigger scale, the head of school has organized 14 optional conversations with staff, almost every week, and they can all join via zoom / google meet voluntarily. We also had 2 compulsory staff meetings for the head of school to announce important updates and to hear any concerns from the staff and faculty. So during these sessions, staff who needed to connect, they did connect. On the other hand, the administration never stops to connect with staff via email updates - daily email was sent out everyday during the week we were about to close, and at least one email is sent out each week from the time we closed until the time we re-opened. The same goes to parents - emails and optional conversation are done once in every 2-3 weeks to ensure that they stay connected to the school.

**2d. Considering the worst-case-scenario where movement control order is reinstated, do you believe that we are ready to WFH again?**

If we really have to close again - we can. We have done it, and we can do it again. We even shared it in our communication to parents that we do foresee that it might happen again. Our teachers and staff are aware, and we can immediately transition back to WFH. Luckily, we do not have the haze so far this year - like last year we had to close a few days because of it. Meaning to say, we are ready not just for COVID-19. Let's say under any circumstances we need to close, the system requires only several clicks, and few WhatsApp messages by the head of school for us to trigger the closure protocol.

**3a. How does the school adapt to the new regulations and SOPs set by the MOE and what are the impacts they pose on our daily operations as a school - physical classes, after school activities, music concerts, sports events etc.**

We spent the summer planning for the reopening - all the key departments were involved such as facilities and maintenance, finance, nurse's office, business management office, principal's office and many others. We planned SOPs, we actually mapped the campus to decide on student movements and to identify bottlenecks in any areas. We also tried to be as 'contactless' as we can - for example, our water fountains are now operated using foot pedals instead of hands, we now have automated hand dryers in every washroom. The school also purchased thermal scanners and plastic barriers; we have foot markings on the floor etc. There is so much work going on behind the scene, and we have so many changes in how we manage student movement on campus.

Aside from that, we have special training for our teachers - mainly our teachers because they are the major front liners who deal with students all the time. It ranges from how do we welcome them, how do we set up the classrooms, how do we observe

their interaction with each other. We still want students to wear masks and maintain physical distancing at all times.

Also, we re-opened on an incremental basis where in the first week we only had one half of the students on campus, and the other half on the second week before having all of them together from the third week onwards. The focus of the first two weeks was primarily training, explaining and giving feedback. We also prepared a communication - one that goes to parents and one that goes to staff that is called a 'road map'. It's a document that is organic - updated whenever new information comes in. For instance, right before this interview the school administrators are finalizing several changes to the document due to what happened in Sabah.

The challenge is then whenever a new announcement goes out, we will need some time to reach out to the relevant ministries - MOH, MOE to clarify what we can do, and we cannot do - we have a very hardworking team in the government relations office. Then we will need to organize all communication, and to inform all the key players of these changes so that they do not send out different messages - this includes director of activities, principals and many others.

The advantage of having the 'roadmap' in the Google Slide format is that we will only need one document that is constantly updated, without having to send multiple documents across a period of time - for example if we use PDF format, parents will need to download it multiple times and some may get confused which one is the latest.

Also, the new regulations and SOPs put a lot of challenges on us in terms of manpower. Many of our colleagues had their job scope changed - a lot of us help in monitoring new developments, gathering data, gathering questions, clarifying answers and then communicating back to the community. At the same time, it is important to note that we still have 75 families who are still overseas and could not travel to Malaysia due to border restrictions. They need our help and we are always staying in touch with them. In such a large community with over 4500 people consisting of parents, students,

faculty and staff - the needs during this pandemic is unbelievable and they all look to us as a school, for help. Our departments all worked to their limit to ensure these needs are met, with the aim to help our families.

**3b. How do students adapt to the new normal, are they adapting well and are there any specific challenges?**

I find the students are adapting well to the new norm, they keep wearing their masks - even if you see the elementary students, teachers help them to maintain physical distancing by holding ropes with every-1-metre markings whenever they move about in a group. Middle school and high school students are well-behaved - but sometimes they do need to be reminded, which is fine as that's part of 'growing up' and adapting to the new norms. Hence, our roles as educators are to monitor and to guide them.

**3c. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?**

We stayed in touch with our new faculty members from when they even left their home countries, until they touched down here in Kuala Lumpur and supported them throughout their quarantine period. Some of them were worried about their job security because globally during this pandemic, international schools terminate their teachers and staff - and we did not do that. They were asking questions such as - "Are you sure that when I arrive, I will not be told that I lost my job?". We assured them that we are not that school and we respect people. Their arrival was around a period of one and a half months, from the first to the last. Our HR team worked so hard to ensure we got all the work permits. When the MCO was lifted, the immigration department was flooded with questions, and the processes (and the difficulty) also depends from which country our new hires are coming from. We didn't give up!

**3d. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?**

When some of them arrived and were in quarantine, they already started teaching virtually even before stepping in physically on campus. Hence, when they finally get to be on campus, they have actually been teaching for a couple of weeks.

We are very happy with where we are now!

**4a. How would you perceive the socio-economic impacts of this pandemic on our students and families?**

Many families were impacted, and some decided to move back to their home country - which impacted our enrolment this year. At the same time, there's a level of trauma involved for many families as they experienced loss, separation over an extended period of time, and radical changes to their lives. It's not easy for a family to be told that they lost their jobs, and moreover they are not in their home country and have no other place to go. It's a big, big issue.

**4b. How did the school provide support to our students and their families WITH the main idea to ensure that students can still attend school?**

To aid our families, we established hardship funds to aid those who are impacted by the pandemic. With the board's approval, we provide a fixed amount of money up to 40% of the 1st semester tuition fee - with semester 1 fee is always larger than semester 2 fee. We have provided such support to 36 students. This assistance is subjected to a through vetting process by several committees. To cushion the impact further, we retracted the tuition fee increase for this academic year and we also had other measures to help our families, financially.

At the same time, we also provide support from the logistical level, as well as emotional level. Our counselors did an amazing job in providing emotional support to both our students and parents who needed it - through ZOOM / Google Meet or whenever they can, on campus.

**4c. How would you describe the current state of enrolment while taking into context, a global pandemic?**

Our enrollment is lesser than planned, as we know it. We are now at 94% of our targeted number of enrolments this year, and even this number we cannot account for full-time equivalent because many of them are paying the fees, staggered, by installments. We will only know in January 2021 if the figure is reliable or not. We are constantly monitoring our enrollment, our finances, - we deferred a lot of our expenditure, we cut the operational budget by 20% and we paused on the salary and benefit increment for faculty and staff. We also did many other measures to ensure we are financially stable. We are optimistic but we are observing how the pandemic will grow - with the recent developments are worrying, cases in Sabah for instance. We are also monitoring border regulations because we are expecting many new families in January, and some are also leaving in December. If those in January are not allowed in, we might lose them as well.

**4d. What would be the best strategy moving forward, to sustain / improve the situation?**

There are four priorities for us now;

1. Quality of learning should not suffer. Whatever happens will keep on providing the best quality of learning.



2. The well-being of our community. - All these challenges have an emotional impact on our community. Our counselors, administrators and teachers are working with students and families to support them, and to support each other - we are all hurting here.
3. Physical safety of everyone - we have communication planned internally - to be alert on announcements, getting to know these known clusters and what sort of communication needs to happen. We have a decision-making matrix that guides our actions in terms of safety. There's a committee that meets regularly on a weekly basis to decide what actions need to happen, what is our response, what changes need to be made to our internal operation and communication with families.
4. Enrolment and finances - we will continue to monitor our enrolment, and our marketing is doing a wonderful job in promoting us. The heads are also meeting with our faculty and staff to help promote us as well. We are keeping our eyes on our finances and to keep it organic - when enrollment changes, our mitigation measures must also be aligned.

At this point of time, it is important for us to be transparent and communicate regularly, be it in person or in writing. This is to ensure that our community is kept up-to-date, they can feel secure - there are no surprises. Our intention is never to alarm people, but to be transparent and as assuring as possible.

#### **4.1.2 Interview 2 - Middle School Principal (R2)**

##### **1a. How was the student participation like in virtual learning in comparison to physical classes?**

Overall, the student participation was very good. Basically, what happens is that we see a mirror image of what would have happened at the school. The kids who were able to remain engaged, stay focused, and function well on campus - and they generally did so virtually. The kids who struggled on campus - their struggle is more pronounced in a virtual setting. When they are being vulnerable at school, we can always catch up with them, ask questions and follow up. But in a virtual setting, we do not have access to them, and if they do not engage (missing classes) we can't get to them.

On the other hand, there are also cases where students who excel at school, they did trail off when we went into virtual learning, while there are students who struggle at school - social anxiety, friendship issues, but they happen to be better in a virtual setting, in fact, they excelled. The reason being, they did not have to bear the social pressures and they are much comfortable being in their own space at the comfort of their own home. Saw basically we saw both sides to it.

**1b.** In terms of the IT side, our students are pretty well-versed. There were no major concerns aside from common issues involving hardware, system and software compatibility or for instance - we have students in China and we have to specifically use ZOOM because Google Meet is not available in China. But if the students are in the same region, and we are not dealing with time zone issues, from the IT side we did alright.

### **1c. What were critical challenges faced by teachers in virtual learning?**

The challenges faced by the teacher - every day we have to adapt to the virtual environment and know that we have no physical access to materials. We also had to adapt in terms of class time as we had to cut it shorter to avoid students sitting too long in front of a computer, and to suppress the fatigue endured by the teachers for being in front of the screen too long. We had to also focus on our own mental wellness in that process otherwise it is exhausting to be in front of the screen all day.

Another crucial challenge for the teachers - in reference to the kids referred to as struggling is that the teachers got frustrated when they try to engage, set an appointment but the child would not show and they fell further behind.

These are some of the challenges we faced because the kids are not here face to face - if they do not turn on their computer then you cannot get them. This is mentally exhausting for the teachers because they held themselves to such a high standard and no matter how hard they try and still could not get the kids engaged, they are basically 'killing' themselves trying to reach that same standard as how they were able to do so in physical classes.

On a day to day basis, it is very demoralizing for a teacher.

### **1d. Are extra-cocurricular activities feasible to be done virtually?**

We did have some activities that were going on virtually and they were largely successful considering the capacity we had - activities in the areas of art, e-sports and games, music, even for the athletic department we had yoga instructors giving online classes, and students took part in activities such as push up challenges and etc. Basically, any activities online that we managed to get kids to connect, they were all

worth it. The reason being, there's always a fear of how we get our students and our communities to stay connected.

With that being said, we will still have to find ways to keep our community connected if another MCO or lockdown is going to take place in the future. We are slowly getting there, and people just need to be more used to not being able to be face-to-face.

**2a. How was the transition like - from working on-campus to working remotely / from home?**

We transitioned well into it - it was all about identifying what exactly we need to work from home remotely. People were shocked about a million things that were going on at that time. But as soon as we identified what we need to do - which we done that earlier in time - the transition was almost seamless

**2b. Did WFH pose any negative impact on faculty and staff productivity?**

To answer that question - the situation was not the same for every teacher or staff. Teachers for example, the amount of learning that was happening at that time was not the same, hence we had to change our pedagogy of teaching - the way teachers had to change and we can see some people were quicker to adapt than others. Some people had more things going on in their personal life, so that affected them in some ways. However, the effect is not tangible and it is fair to say that everyone delivers as expected - in some cases way more than expected given the circumstances that we were in.

**2c. Did virtual communication (Google Meet, Skype, Gmail, WhatsApp) affect the quality of communication among faculty and staff, and caused any difficulties in task execution or decision making?**

Virtual communication does not impair any communication process between staff and faculty members. We can do what we do now on Zoom. We did it, we dealt with tons of intricate and tricky issues. However, these platforms all had their function and roles but they can never substitute face to face interaction. Hence, we did lose the quality of communication in several routes, for example between staff and students, as well as faculty and students. Students in this case tend to turn off their cameras. To illustrate this further - even right now on campus, we are all wearing masks and we do lose a bit of quality in communication even from that small barrier. Hence when we are talking about just communicating through a computer screen, it amplifies the effect and makes such a large difference in our quality of communication.

**2d. Considering the worst-case-scenario where movement control order is reinstated, do you believe that we are ready to WFH again?**

Definitely! We are much more ready now and people are less daunted. Let's look at it from a more positive side, the beauty of what we have been through for the last 6 months is that we have learnt so much. Quick recall, we had to close for a day or two in the fall last year due to haze, even then we learnt so much on having everything done virtually. A day or two is not enough for us to 'hone' our skills to survive in such condition. But once we had it for the whole trimester, we got pretty good at it! Therefore, if in any case we are told to, "Hey, let's shut down for two weeks, stay at home, get the cases down again before we come back to school", - we would not miss a beat because we know we are coming back to school. So, we could change things a little bit there. However, say we need to close for a longer period of time, we are still going to do a better job than before. We still may lose something because still, online learning cannot substitute face-to-face learning. But in terms of readiness, we are already ahead in the game.

**3a. How does the school adapt to the new regulations and SOPs set by the MOE and what are the impacts they pose on our daily operations as a school - physical classes, after school activities, music concerts, sports events etc.**

We are grateful to be back on campus and we are grateful to be able to do much of what we are doing right now. Some may agree or disagree - but the experience that the kids are having right now in school, is somehow similar to what it was before COVID-19. Yes, we have to wear masks, maintain physical distance - but let's put it this way, for the most part students are still going to band classes and play instruments, going to math classes and getting taught. Yes, they are differences and challenges for sure - spacing ourselves a bit more throughout the day is not easy and we as educators we have to keep reminding them.

**3b. How do students adapt to the new normal, are they adapting well and are there any specific challenges?**

The kids are adapting extremely well, but the quality of the activities that we are doing now such as music concerts, play, sporting events are just not at the same level, intensity, focus and of course not at the same level of excitement and depth. We used to have a volleyball season that went full on 5 days a week, and even games on the weekend and so many tournaments. But this year is all different, the kids play one day a week that will go on the whole year - just not the same! We definitely lost something there and that poses an impact on the kids.

**3c. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?**

We did as well as anyone could have done it, honestly. Our new faculty members felt very connected, they were cared for and were attentive to their needs. It was not easy, and much more difficult to run the school when some teachers are quarantined, and some are not, some in the country while some are not. It was definitely not a normal year for them - for anyone really - and we feel for them because they seem to be struggling now.

**3d. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?**

For those who just got here, they did not have the chance to build the relationship with other members of our community like others usually did when they first arrived in the country. Usually, the new group of teachers that came in are quite close because they spend a lot of time together, do a lot of things together and the group this year just did not have much of that happening for them. They just did not have the time to connect and bond with their new cohort.

Honestly, it was a big challenge for them - you just came into a new country and you had to sit in quarantine in a hotel for two weeks. Then as soon as you come out the school has already started and you walked into the school without knowing anyone personally and stepped into your class not knowing what to do. On one hand, we should be proud of the work we did to bring them into the country under such tough and uncertain global crisis, and this is as good as it could have been but on the other hand, they are a lot of things they should have got but they did not and that is a big challenge for them.

**4a. & 4b. How would you perceive the socio-economic impacts of this pandemic on our students and families? & How did the school provide support to our students and their families WITH the main idea to ensure that students can still attend school?**

The socio part of it is how we supported our community by being available to them online, trying to meet with them and keep on trying to connect with them in anyways we could. Our community has a lot of needs right now. They are going through several transitions from the very first MCO, but one fact remains that they cannot go anywhere out of the country where in most cases of our families where they loved ones are. 80% of our families are expatriates which makes the impact so severe. This is really a tough time to go through when you are away from our loved ones. *(Interviewee then gave the example that he himself has not been able to see his children physically for over a year now).*

At the same time for faculty and staff, there is a different form of social and emotional impact as we are constantly trying to be there supporting everyone and being available at all time - and at one point knowing we will have to learn to say "no" to certain things. For instance, some parents were wondering if teachers can continue to support their kids by having online classes while they are all already teaching on campus - we cannot continue to let teachers have two audiences. The reason being, when the school reopened the number of online students has gotten a lot smaller and at one point for example when a teacher has 22 kids physically in class, and maybe 3 online, it will not be an equal split in terms of time and attention. Teachers need a lot of energy and attention to attend to the 22 in class, while at the same time trying their best to ensure the 3 has equal attention as well.

In terms of economic impact, it's pretty dark. For instance;

1. Parents lose their jobs
2. We are staffed for a certain number of students but we are not making those numbers



The school's expenditure and the income line does not match anymore. So now, we have to adjust our ways. At the same time, we had to help all the families the best we can, especially those who have been loyal with us for a big number of years in terms of school fees and etc. This is happening all over the world, and no one can escape, everyone is affected. There is no denying that the longer it goes, the more dire the impacts and it will be much harder for all of us to manage them - more families might be losing their job and have to relocate to their home countries.

The socio-economic impacts of this global pandemic to our families is significant, and very much real.

**4c. How would you describe the current state of enrolment while taking into context, a global pandemic?**

Looking at enrolment, on a much larger scale we are actually doing a lot better than any other schools. We are down by about 5% to 6% of our targeted enrollment - this seems small but it's a significant number. In a bigger picture, as long as our revenue (enrolment) matches our expenditure, we will be fine. But when we talk about expenditure, we will have to understand what goes into it.

Expenditure is not just about what we buy, or how much we spend on employee salaries or how much we pay our bills - we have to match a few things for instance how do we match some rates of inflation? Employees will need to have an increase of salary and benefits fairly regularly, perhaps every two years or so in order to match or suppress the increasing rate of inflation.

The longer we stay at a certain level, the higher the chance of you we lose our ground in terms of financial capacity. Teaching is a kind of profession where we reward experience, and generally every year you teach you can expect a slight increase in your salary, at maybe 3 or 4%. However, this year we have not been able to do that this

year. Also, as a non-profit school, we do not aim to make profit but we aim to have reserves which means we actually have to bring in more than we are actually spending.

These are some of the things why we really need to look into our enrollment because a slight decrease does bring significant impact to our financial well-being. At the moment we are actually in a very good position because we are a strong, well-sourced, good-paying school which means our teachers will want to stay. When we have teachers that want to stay, then we will have stability. When we have stability, it creates trust within the community. Confidence within the community creates trust, trust creates loyalty, and loyalty makes families stay, and new families coming.

This is important because when things are uncertain (global pandemic in this case) people tend to gravitate to safety, and we are seen as a safe haven. We have weathered the storms - we are still running a good program, still have all our teachers and staff in employment, and everything is in operation at the school pretty much as it should. Not all the other schools are at this level.

Thus, in the current situation, we are at the state where we can still offer that level of service and which allows us to undertake some of the market share from other schools that people think what they get is not worth the fees they are paying. We may be the most expensive school - but if you go somewhere else and pay less than we are, but you are not happy with the product - you are not happy with the experience your kids are getting at that school, and then you realize you just need to commit a bit more to get your kids to our school and you can be happy, that may sway you to make that jump. At the same time, as an organization we have to be careful as to not price ourselves beyond the price where they want to make that jump, but they cannot afford it.

#### **4d. What would be the best strategy moving forward, to sustain / improve the situation?**

Moving forward, as discussed earlier financial management is very much important. When it comes to being financially prudent, we need to change our mindset where “oh, this is a tough time and we need to cut (salary, employment etc.) and then add back in when everything bounces back in place. What this means - instead of thinking about down-sizing, we should talk more about right-sizing the school.

In other words, we need to take all the resources we have and find ways to be more efficient with them, or what can we do *more* with them. From there, we also need to understand that we are not simply going to jump back up to the normal level (how we usually operate) and then jump back down again when things get worse. We ought to educate ourselves to treat this right-sizing as the new norm of operation so we will not be too sensitive whenever there are slight fluctuations in enrollment because we are maintaining a very much steady pace, and we are doing a lot *more* with our resources rather than just looking blindly at the income-expenditure line or simply ‘cut’ when we feel we need to

From the education side, we need to continue to be very current, very leading, very cutting-edge. We can no longer be too traditional, we need to be out there and ensure prospects that when they send their kids to our school, they will have a one-of-a-kind experience. We strongly believe that our community, our culture is very important and we want them to be part of it. At the same time, we want everyone in our community to realize that we are no longer in the same world that we grew up in - you go to school, and then university, graduate and get a job, then hopefully you will be happy. Why don't we be happy and fulfilled now? We want our students to be able to be in a conducive environment where they are able to do what they love, and unleash their full potential. We want them to take ownership of their own learning and growth. If they like something, learn it, master it and develop the required skills around it.

### **4.1.3 Interview 3 - High School Vice Principal (R3)**

**1a & 1b.** As far as student participation in virtual learning, the students are actually more comfortable working online in comparison to adults a lot of the time. Their comfort level was fine, but we did have to deal with multiple challenges when we were full time in virtual mode. At the same time, we are lucky to have all the tools we need in terms of tech support, our kids have the space and facilities at home and generally they are all well-versed in IT. We are kind of privileged in that way.

#### **1c. What were critical challenges faced by teachers in virtual learning?**

It has so much to do with interpersonal and human interaction between teachers and students. For instance, in a virtual class, teachers may miss some cues, signals, or important piece of the communication from students - we are talking about non-verbal interactions and teachers could not pinpoint exactly what it is.

With that being said, as we progressed through the 6 months of virtual learning, we started to have one-on-one sessions with some particular students, so we can start to monitor and gather vital pieces of information that we could not get in a normal ZOOM class.

Virtual learning has also made our teachers a lot more economical with how they spend their time when they interact with students. Teaching in school, we may have the privilege of time and space to integrate experimental pieces of learnings but in a completely virtual setting, we had to cut it away and be very, very specific and targeted with our lessons, and engage students with the base on the very important piece of information. So yes, it changed our practice for sure and like all transition there was indeed some level of discomfort. However, given the great quality of students that we have, as well as wonderful teachers that are willing to work extra hard.

At the same time, that posed another challenge for our teachers - they struggled to emotionally and physically distance themselves from work. We have the kind of wonderful teachers who will keep working. We found out that some of them started to get frustrated because they did not give themselves to stop working - "it's 7PM and I need to stop working!" We want to be able to scale back a bit, knowing that there are so many ways they can bring the standard of learning up to a different level when in school, and that it is okay to not be able to do that now.

We are also in the situation where our family members are not here, so there was mourning of loss for not being able to be here with family during the holidays. Before this, when we think of holidays what we often had in mind was to travel, go to the beach and lie on the sand but we kind of got rid of that quickly. Holiday for us now is thinking and worrying about our family, if we ever get to see them again.

#### **1d. Are extra-cocurricular activities feasible to be done virtually?**

We had plenty of activities done virtually! For instance, we had a group of jazz band kids get together virtually, played and fed off each other. That was one of those things that the adults were like "oh we have to solve this problem" but the kids were quicker and overcame it better than we do! Up to a certain time, we were all starting to struggle because we have been sitting by the computer desks for such a long time. We realized that we will also need to engage in some other, invigorating ways and get creative to do that. It was amazing how our teachers got together with the students on ZOOM calls and did physical workouts together which at the same time acted as a community builder. We had debriefed sessions about this when we got back to school - these are some of the activities that we can carry forward if we ever had to go through such a situation again.

**2a. How was the transition like - from working on-campus to working remotely / from home?**

There was a real leadership going on behind the curtain that not everyone got to see in making that transition a seamless one, and no one got left behind. All the key players - head of school, principals, administrator basically saw what was coming, it was a clear writing on the wall. So, we had multiple plans in place and just a couple of days before the first MCO commenced, we called 'time-out'. We decided to take a day where students stay home while all faculty and staff come on campus and ensure that we have at least all the basic tools before we go on working from home until who knows when. Prior to that, we already had our tech team on standby mode so they can efficiently upscale everyone with the necessary tools, put our plan in place which includes multiple contingencies while keeping the need in mind that if we suddenly need to switch to another contingency, then we would.

Luckily, we did not due to a number of very wise decisions made - and these decisions were not derived from just someone's singular idea, there was a lot of research behind it. The head of school had been gathering inputs from other directors of international school all around the world while principals were finding the best modes for online learning - and these accounts into the important decisions that we made. For everyone else, it was a huge shock that took place within two days - students went into quarantine, and the day after we walked into the first phase MCO, but there have always been plans and contingencies in place.

## **2b. Did WFH pose any negative impact on faculty and staff productivity?**

There are things that lend themselves, that allow them to be done at home through a computer. But in some cases, let's take the activities and athletics department as an example - their productivity took a hit and through no fault of their own because their jobs require themselves and students to be physically in presence at school. Therefore, they had to find other ways to engage the students but in general, given the circumstances their productivity went down for sure. Another example, it's also hard for our counselors to be as productive as they are in school because that's just the way they can function optimally. Working at home may cause them to work longer hours but get less done. It is hard to engage with kids, ensuring that they will turn up to their online appointments where as in school, they can just walk up to the office or the counselors can just simply find them.

## **2c. Did virtual communication (Google Meet, Skype, Gmail, WhatsApp) affect the quality of communication among faculty and staff, and caused any difficulties in task execution or decision making?**

In terms of using online platforms as means of communication - there are several takes to it. Generally speaking, younger generations of staff and faculty tend to be more comfortable and adapt quicker while not so for the older generations. To a certain extent that would be the case, but we also should note that individual personality is also a variable. For example, some people may be comfortable speaking in a zoom call where there are 100 participants in it and just keep talking regardless there are or no response from them. Some people still need to have that two-way element of communication - non-verbal cues, change in facial expressions and body language.

**2d. Considering the worst-case-scenario where movement control order is reinstated, do you believe that we are ready to WFH again?**

We are ready if we have to go on another round of learning and working remotely. The reason being, we learnt our lessons and we now have more tools than what we had last time. We have experience to fall back on and we know that our system works. Still, in some other aspects it is still very much difficult - in terms of timeline for high school students for example, grade 9 & 10 will be just fine because they have plenty of space and time ahead of them. However, that's not the case for the seniors. Graduating students face the risk of losing so many one-time opportunities which they can no longer hope to do because this is their last year. Also, they are going through the tough IB exams which carries external expectations and that is causing them to be more stressed out.

With that being said, it does not mean that we are not ready, it is just that there are still implications we have to be aware of.

**3a. & 3b. How does the school adapt to the new regulations and SOPs set by the MOE and what are the impacts they pose on our daily operations as a school - physical classes, after school activities, music concerts, sports events etc. & Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?**

Yes, they do impact our daily activities. Taking music students as example, it is quite a challenge being a musician when you have to keep your masks on, ensuring that you maintain physical distancing at all times. The same goes to athletic activities - we are a school that is famous for its rugby and volleyball team and kids can no longer freely play these sports anymore. We have to impose limitations in terms of time, space and numbers. But that is something that everyone has to adapt to, and that is what we are all doing right now. Not just the students, but faculty and staff as well.



If now we are to walk around down on the deck or in the hallways, we can see that everyone is wearing masks, they wash their hands often but they are still kids - we have to constantly remind them about it and especially when it comes to physical distancing, it is always challenge even for us adults - when I am trying to hear you better I tend to lean in closer. Luckily, we are working in a school where our kids are actually compliant - so when we try to get them to do something, they always do it although we need to sometimes remind them. That may not be the case in other schools.

In general, the kids are doing well! They are very adaptable to it, from working in class to working online, in whatever modes they need to function in, they adapt well to it. They are very intelligent young people!

**3c. & 3d. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic? & How did the school welcome and orient the new faculty members, while still maintaining and embracing the new norm?**

For our new faculty members that just got into the country - yes, they do have experience working and teaching online but this time is just not under the same circumstances. They just arrived, went into quarantine for two weeks, and straightaway started teaching while some started teaching while they are still in quarantine. The problem is, they just did not get the chance to experience Malaysia like we did, or how new hires did in the previous years. Last we had the chance to bond face-to-face, we got together, shake hands, go to dinner and hangout together. Their acclamation into this country has been stunted because of the pandemic. It's just not the same.

The philosophy in education is that - the most important thing as an educator or a school administrator, is to foster good relationships with the students. This posed a challenge for our new faculty member, especially those who started teaching in quarantine - how do you cultivate a relationship based on trust, when you have never been in the same room with them before and the first time is through a ZOOM call? How do you as a teacher, 'invite' them into the 'classroom'?

Now, for high school students, they may be able to adapt or establish a foundation of that relationship earlier because they are more mature. But for middle school students, that may not be the case because if they do not trust you, that will have a significant impact on the teaching and learning process. The whole orientation and the processes of being on campus, showing them where their lockers are on the first day is actually a very important thing in establishing that relationship.

**4a. & 4b. How would you perceive the socio-economic impacts of this pandemic on our students and families? & How did the school provide support to our students and their families WITH the main idea to ensure that students can still attend school?**

From the beginning, we knew that there will be severe economic impacts endured by our families. To cushion them, the school made some adjustments to our fee structure - families can now pay by instalments, that would help them a little bit. However, in these transitions, we have to accept the fact that some families will have to leave. We made sure that we supported them in the process - communicated with their new school and ensured that their transition went smoothly. These are some inevitable cases that we cannot retain them because they lost their jobs and they had to relocate to their home country. We don't just let them go, we extend our support the furthest we can.

From the aspect of emotional support to the families especially the kids - we have our counselors full on engaging them - including the ones that are leaving us. Our counselors are talking to them, communicating their next steps, and how they can still achieve their goals even though they are no longer with us.

Back to the aspect of economy, the real economic impacts of this pandemic have not really been felt yet and that is something we definitely foresee in our way forward. We had a lot of the governments in the world giving aids and bailouts to their people,

and who knows how long they have until the money runs out? That will cause another wave of economic impacts that may be a lot more severe than what we see now. For us a not-for-profit school, we do not have a big savings account. Hence, even if we lose a small number of students - that really impacted us financially. We suppressed that by freezing increments for our faculty and staff, and that is something that we always have every year.

Next year, we may have a slightly lesser number this year and that is caused by the rate of attrition. We are not laying off anyone - but we already have teachers sending in notice of resignation because they had to relocate back to their home country, or it is just the time for them to retire. With them leaving, we will maintain whatever number we have and will not hire anyone new. Hence, the class that they used to teach, will be bigger than what it is now.

#### **4c. How would you describe the current state of enrolment while taking into context, a global pandemic?**

Prior to the start of the year, we projected a certain number of enrolments we hoped to achieve and at this moment we are at about 5% to 6% less than what were projected. It is also important to look at it from the perspective of divisions - that particular drop enrolment accounts for all divisions, from elementary up to high school. Interesting fact, high school actually has more students enrolled this year than the last 5 consecutive years. With the budget cuts going on for all divisions - high school actually had to cater to more students with budget cuts and that is another story altogether in comparison to other departments.

Again, to suppress these impacts, that is why we had to make some tough decisions such as the freezing of salary & benefit increment this year, budget cuts, not getting more new hires etc. But the bottom line is, whatever we do, we are responsible to our community and we want to be able to provide the same quality of education in all situations.

#### **4d. What would be the best strategy moving forward, to sustain / improve the situation?**

First of all, in any leadership - relationship is the most important foundation. We can gain the community's respect and trust by being transparent, by being thorough and making sure that we are communicating on a regular basis - not only on what are decisions that are being made, but the 'whys' as well, and what are the information that are being used to drive those decisions. With that being said, consistency is also a key. You can be transparent once; you can communicate once but you have to remember that you need to consistently do that. Even if things do not change or there's no significant development, people will still need to hear from you and it is important for you to check-in on them, update where things are even if things stay the same.

Who knows what else can happen? We used to have cases down to only a couple of a day and now suddenly we are seeing hundreds of new ones every day. Uncertainties are abundant nowadays which is why consistency in communication is utterly important. If things are bad - then people need to hear that.

## 4.2 Data Analysis

### 1a. How was the student participation like in virtual learning in comparison to physical classes?

**All three respondents are on the same page when it comes to student participation.** Most students were able to adapt well and continue to engage in productive learning despite some unique challenges to different groups. For instance, all three respondents acknowledged that going virtual did change the way the students communicate among their peers as well as their teachers. Each of them introduced **three different frames** to this question;

1. **The Head of School** discussed a reversed effect that virtual learning had on introverts and extroverts' students. For example - extroverts may miss being out - while it may not be the case for introverts. They may find it's easier for them to commit to virtual learning. Some of the shy students felt that the anonymity in virtual learning is beneficial to them - they can get assistance from their teachers virtually, send private messages whereas in a physical class environment, everything is public.
2. **The Middle School Principal** brought another important perspective into the study where he discussed a frame where students who were able to and function well on campus - they generally did so virtually. On the other hand, students who struggled on campus - their struggle is more amplified in a virtual setting.
3. **The High School Vice Principal** discussed a much more general frame where students tend to adapt faster and be more comfortable to study/work online in comparison to adults - this prompted a strong necessity to discuss this frame for teachers and staff.

**1b.** All three respondents felt that the students' IT skills are great and enough to get them through the school's online learning module. They have a strong sense of self-efficacy on this matter as they admit that the school, and the students, are all very much privileged. It is safe to say that all students have access to the gadgets, internet access and comforts of our home. However, they did outline some problems that the school recognized along the way but did not have a tangible effect on learning as the issues were solvable.

1. Common issues in regards to outdated software or hardware used by students which does not allow some learning platforms to function optimally
2. Compatibility issue - some students are in China and they do not have access to Google. Hence, they could not access Google Classroom or Google Meet for.
3. Time zone issue - some students are outside of the region and sometime have to attend classes at 3am (their local time)

### **1c. What were critical challenges faced by teachers in virtual learning?**

In all three responses, the respondents discussed varieties of details but all were within the same frame - virtual learning can never replace on-campus, face-to-face learning. According to the Head of School, the school tries to make virtual learning as interactive and as personal as possible, because it cannot ever replace the effectiveness of on-campus learning. Going on virtual learning took a toll on everyone, especially the teachers. They had to endure so many challenges not only related to their teaching, but also their personal life - because they literally 'brought' their classrooms into their home.

Also, because teaching & learning is a two way process, virtual learning is very difficult especially with younger students. Teachers may miss some cues, signals, or important gestures from the students - we are talking about non-verbal interactions and teachers could not pinpoint exactly what it is.

Here are some of the challenges outlined by our respondents;

1. Isolation - being away from colleagues, students, and some even could not be with their families!
2. Class time needs to be shorter to avoid fatigue for both students and teachers. The school has so much concern on mental wellness in such situations.
3. Some kids may not be as responsive - not showing up to classes, or even their personal appointments. This really frustrates the teachers because they have no other way to get access to the kids other than a computer screen.
4. It is mentally exhausting - teachers tend to set a high bar for themselves although they are so much 'handicapped' in a virtual setting. They ought to think about the expectations from both the school, and of course parents. In some cases, they just could not physically and emotionally distance themselves from work.

To cushion the impacts of these challenges, the school did some improvisations in terms of teaching where class time was cut shorter, but in order to maintain a high level of productivity, teachers were required to be more targeted in terms of the content and delivery. They also had tutorial videos made for students to refer back to - instead of using standard videos made for the syllabus, the teachers made the tutorial videos themselves so that the kids can still listen to their own teacher, albeit it is just a video playback.

#### **1d. Are extra-co-curricular activities feasible to be done virtually?**

All three respondents gave some examples on some extra-co-curricular activities that were actually scheduled for on-campus, but were improvised, and done virtually. These include virtual choir, remote workout challenges, yoga classes via ZOOM, e-sport competition etc. In general, they discussed that while it is of course not inducing the same experience if they were to have it on campus - but the important take away is that teachers can always keep students engaged and connected, outside of their day-to-day classes. The school has garnered so much input from these activities, and this is

something that they can do better, in the case the school has to go through another round of MCO.

## **2a. How was the transition like - from working on-campus to working remotely / from home?**

Overall, all three respondents stood on the premise that the school transitioned well to working remotely for both teachers and staff. As the Head of School discussed in the interview, there were so many things happening behind the scenes well before the first MCO was announced because a big organization with a huge number of stakeholders, the school has to always stay a step ahead in the game.

They had to strategically foresee and anticipate 'threats' to the school operation - same goes to the pandemic, the school already had contingencies in place ready to be deployed. They accepted the fact and possibility that something bad is coming and instead of telling everyone everything is okay, the leaders started to work on the contingencies.

The rigorous planning was not a one-man job, it was a culmination of engagements with all department heads, especially with IT & Tech, human resource, and finance department. IT & Tech for example, already had laptops and gadgets ready for staff in case the school suddenly had to close and everyone was required to work remotely. Head of school and all the principals were already in engagement with other international schools both local and overseas just to get inputs in terms of academic and operation management.

It seemed like a huge shock for everyone, but leaders were so aware that we walked into the first MCO with plans and contingencies in place. If not, the school would not be able to transition so seamlessly. All it took was two emails from the head of school and the next day everyone was working and teaching from home. This was a strong manifestation of **resilient leadership**.



## **2b. Did WFH poses any negative impact on faculty and staff productivity?**

All three respondents are on the same page on this matter - yes, for some staff their productivity is impacted. However, with that being said, it does not necessarily mean a bad thing. It is very much understandable because for some staff, their jobs require them to be in school physically - taking the activities and athletic department for example. It is impossible for them to achieve the same level of productivity when they are not allowed in school. Another example - school counselors. Their jobs require them to have personal interactions with students thus being at school is the main way for them to function normally. We have discussed earlier on how difficult it is to have two-way interactions with students, virtually. Working at home may cause them to work longer hours but get less done.

However, the effect is not tangible and it is fair to say that everyone delivers as expected - in some cases way more than expected given the circumstances that the school was in.

## **2c. Did virtual communication (Google Meet, Skype, Gmail, Whatsapp) affect the quality of communication among faculty and staff, and caused any difficulties in task execution or decision making?**

To quote the Head of School, *“In many ways, people read better and listen better when they do so, remotely. However, it’s different because people miss being with each other”*. This statement basically sums up mostly what all the respondents were discussing on this particular question.

Virtual means of communication does not impair any operation or management processes of the school. Decisions were still made, issues were discussed, tricky and intricate matters were still solved. However, it is more on the question of quality of the

communication itself - although everyone basically saw and talked to each other via ZOOM or Google Meet, it often lacks emotional conviction.

With that being said, it does not mean we should not try to make the best out of it. The head of school has organized 14 optional conversations with staff, almost every week, and they can all join via zoom / google meet voluntarily. There were also 2 compulsory staff meetings for the head of school to announce important updates and to hear any concerns from the staff and faculty. So, during these sessions, staff who needed to connect - they did connect.

**2d. Considering the worst-case-scenario where movement control order is reinstated, do you believe that we are ready to WFH again?**

All three respondents are on the same page that the school is indeed ready if the MCO/CMCO is reinstated and has to go back to virtual learning and working-from-home. The reasons are as follows:

1. A foresight is in place - anticipating that there are chances the country might go back in MCO/CMCO. All parents, students, teachers and staff are made aware of this so no one is caught off guard.
2. Just like the first time, a system and a set of protocols are already in place - to quote the Head of School, "*..the system requires only several clicks, and few WhatsApp messages by the head of school for us to trigger the closure protocol*"
3. Experience is a great teacher - all three respondents are confident that the school is ready because they have learnt so much over the last 6-7 months, and the school is definitely better prepared now.

The one thing that the school leaders seemed to be concerned at most is the final year experience for grade 12 students. There are some activities and opportunities that will knock only once, and that would be in their final year. Should another MCO take

place and the school needs to go on virtual learning for an extended period of time, that's quite a loss for these kids.

**3a. How does the school adapt to the new regulations and SOPs set by the MOE and what are the impacts they pose on our daily operations as a school - physical classes, after school activities, music concerts, sports events etc.**

All three respondents discussed that re-opening the school after CMCO was indeed challenging. The school actually re-opened about 3 weeks late in comparison to other local schools as it was still summer break. During this time, a lot of groundwork was done in order to ensure that the school is adhering to all the SOPs and guidelines provided by the MOE. The head of school outlined some of the key activities that were done;

1. The administration mapped the campus in order to decide on student movements and to identify bottlenecks in any areas.
2. The school tries to be as 'contactless' as possible - for example, water fountains are now operated using foot pedals instead of hands, and there are now automated hand dryers in every washroom.
3. Thermal scanners and plastic barriers are placed at every entrance, and foot markings are placed on the floor.
4. Training for Teachers - It ranges from how to welcome students, how to set up the classrooms, how to observe student interactions, ensuring that they do not breach any SOPs.

During the first week, the leaders made the decision to have students on campus on an incremental basis - one half during the first week, another half during the second week, and all of them from the third weeks onwards. The aim for the first two weeks was to *learn, get feedback, and make any necessary adjustments* to the SOPs. The leaders are taking such preventive measures to ensure there are little to no risks of infection at the school. The respondents also believe that *communication is key* - hence there's an

organic document that is shared with everyone in the community. It is getting real-time updates any time there are new announcements or latest information. Extra-curricular and after school activities are pretty much affected under the new norm. There is a critical need to impose limitations in terms of time, space and numbers.

**3b. How do students adapt to the new normal, are they adapting well and are there any specific challenges?**

All three respondents have strong confidence that the students are adapting well to the new norm. Everyone is wearing masks; they wash their hands often but they are still kids - we have to constantly remind them about it and especially when it comes to physical distancing and that is not causing a ruckus for the teachers because the generally the students here are compliant. In general, everyone is great at playing their role.

**3c. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?**

This question is pretty much unique to international schools as they tend to have a big majority of expatriates as teachers in opposed to local schools. All three respondents in their interviews specifically thanked the HR department for doing such a wonderful job ensuring that we got all the new hires (teachers) into the country safe and sound. The HR team worked around the clock during the summer arranging everything from them leaving their home countries down to the first day they stepped foot into the school. It was such a tiresome affair.

On the other hand of that process, the leaders played their roles as well. They are in continuous communication with the new hires, providing assurance to them that the school will provide full support along the way - even assured them that they won't be told that they lost their jobs when they land here in Malaysia because sad but true, it happens at some other international schools. Again, "*communication is key*".

### **3d. Is getting new faculty members into the country a big challenge during this pandemic?**

Overall, to quote the Middle School Principal, *“We did as well as anyone could have done it, honestly. Our new faculty members felt very connected, they were cared for and were attentive to their needs”*. The only thing that the school hoped that it could assist the new teachers to acclimate themselves to the country better - orientation was online, some teachers started teaching in quarantine etc. However, not everything is possible given the external factors that are beyond control, such time-packed schedules to ensure school days are run accordingly without any hold up.

### **4a. How would you perceive the socio-economic impacts of this pandemic on our students and families?**

To quote the Head of School, *“..there’s a level of trauma involved for many families as they experienced loss, separation over an extended period of time, and radical changes to their lives”*. All three respondents are totally on the same page on the matter of socio-economic impacts the pandemic on students and their families - absolutely severe.

There are parents who lost their jobs, had their pay cut, or lost education benefit for their children. With no social or economic safety net to fall back onto, some had to relocate back to their home countries. At the same time, emotional impact is as expected, severe as well. They cannot go anywhere out of the country where in most cases their families are abroad. The Middle School Principal is also going through it where due to closure of international borders; he has not seen his children for more than a year now. At the same time for faculty and staff, they are also facing their own struggles while constantly trying to be there supporting everyone, and being available at all times. They are impacted as well.

**4b. How did the school provide support to our students and their families WITH the main idea to ensure that students can still attend school?**

To cushion the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, the school has deployed several initiatives;

1. Providing a fixed amount of money up to 40% of the 1st semester tuition fee. At the point of writing, there are currently 36 families who have undertaken this aid.
2. Fee increase for this year is frozen, and parents can now pay the fee in installments.
3. School administration provides extensive assistance for families that needed to relocate by communicating with the new school as well as providing counseling for the students, to help them process the transition and how they can still achieve their goals even though they are no longer with the school.
4. For existing students, counselors are available at all times if they need support, or someone to talk to.

**4c. How would you describe the current state of enrolment while taking into context, a global pandemic?**

All three respondents perceived that without a doubt the enrolment is lesser than planned this year due to the pandemic. The school recorded a 5% to 6% drop in enrolment in comparison to the last 5 years. It seems little, but according to the Head of School, we cannot account for full-time equivalents because many of them are paying the fees, staggered, by installments. The school will only know in January 2021 if the figure is reliable or not.

The Middle School Principal used a very interesting *frame* to explain how even a small drop enrolment numbers can pose quite a bad impact on the school, financially. He explained that as a non-profit school, being financially stable is not just about

matching the revenue against expenditure line - the school also has to take into account the rate of inflation. Employees will need to have an increase of salary and benefits fairly regularly, perhaps every two years or so in order to match or suppress the increasing cost of living. Furthermore, he explained that teaching is a profession where you are ludicrously rewarded for your experience in the private and international school industries globally, teachers are expecting an annual increase of salary of at least 3% or 4%. Also as a non-profit school, it does not aim to make profit but instead to have reserves which mean the school actually has to bring in more than what it is actually spending.

To quote him, *“At the moment we are actually in a very good position because we are a strong, well-sourced, good-paying school which means our teachers will want to stay. When we have teachers that want to stay, then we will have stability. When we have stability, it creates trust within the community. Confidence within the community creates trust, trust creates loyalty, and loyalty makes families stay, and new families coming.”*

#### **4d. What would be the best strategy moving forward, to sustain / improve the situation?**

The head of school provided a very crystal-clear explanation on the way forward of the school by outlining the 4 main priorities, which are generally similar to what the other two respondents discussed in the interview

- 1. Quality of learning should not suffer**
- 2. The well-being of our community**
- 3. Physical safety of everyone**
- 4. Enrolment and finance**

The Middle School Principal shared the same view, as he mentioned that the school needs to continue to be very current, very leading, very cutting-edge. Whatever

happens, quality of learning is the top priority. He also shared extensively in the aspect of enrolment and finance - he stressed the importance of **right-sizing**, instead of downsizing. He believes that it is important to reflect, take a look at all the resources we have and find ways to be more efficient with them, or what can the school do *more* with them. This is to ensure that the school can operate at a very steady, optimal level so that when there's a slight fluctuation in enrollment, financially it can stay much more agile because the management is not simply doing "cuts" when things are bad, and "adds" when things seem better. Strategic foresight is very much important in the current situation.

The High School Vice Principal on the other hand discussed a different frame which is also super relevant to the study - leadership and communication. He stressed that the key to a good leadership is good relationships - in this case with parents, students, teachers, and staff. He and the head of school shared the same view on the importance of being transparent, as well as to communicate regularly to not only parents and students, but also to the teachers and staff.

*"This is to ensure that our community is kept up-to-date, they can feel secure - there are no surprises. Our intention is never to alarm people, but to be transparent and as assuring as possible."* - Head of School

*"You can be transparent once; you can communicate once but you have to remember that you need to consistently do that. Even if things do not change or there's no significant development, people will still need to hear from you.. Uncertainties are abundant nowadays which is why consistency in communication is utterly important. If things are bad - then people need to hear that."* - High School Vice Principal



### 4.3 SWOT Analysis

<b>STRENGTHS</b>			
<b>Virtual Learning</b>	<b>WFH</b>	<b>Re-opening &amp; Welcoming New Faculty</b>	<b>Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19</b>
Great student participation (R1, R2, R3)	Contingencies were already planned ahead (R1, R2, R3)	Comprehensive re-opening plan set in place (R1, R2, R3)	Established a hardship fund for families in need (R1, R2, R3)
Students' IT skill/knowledge is generally good (R1, R2, R3)	Strong support in terms of IT & tech resources (R1, R2, R3)	Students are adapting well to the new norm (R1, R2, R3)	Counselors are available offline/online for emotional support (R2, R3)
Extra-cocu activities are improvised and done virtually (R1, R2, R3)	Ready for another round of WFH (R1, R2, R3)	Consistent waves of communication to staff and parents (R1, R2, R3)	Instalment plan for school fees (R1, R2, R3)
Very adaptable and agile in terms of modifying class and lesson structure (R1, R2, R3)	HoS always in contact with all staff through various ZOOM optional meetings (R1)	Has a dedicated government relation office (R1)	Clear outline of moving forward (R1, R2, R3)
Adequate resources and tech support for virtual classes (R1, R2, R3)			

<b>WEAKNESSES</b>			
<b>Virtual Learning</b>	<b>WFH</b>	<b>Re-opening &amp; Welcoming New Faculty</b>	<b>Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19</b>
Virtual Learning can never replace on-campus learning (R1, R2, R3)	Affected productivity of some job functions (R2, R3)	Extra-cocu activities are very much affected (R1, R2, R3)	Freezing of salary & benefit increment for staff & teachers (R1, R2, R3)
Some students are stranded abroad, thus timezone-clash is an issue (R2)	Communication lacks emotional conviction (R1, R2, R3)	New teachers did not have an immersive acclimation to Malaysia (R1, R2, R3)	Enrolment went down by 5% to 6% (R1, R2, R3)
Virtual learning does hinder some effectiveness in communication between teachers and students (R2, R3)		Teaching while in quarantine is difficult (R2, R3)	
Mentally exhausting for teachers (R1, R2, R3)			

OPPORTUNITIES			
Virtual Learning	WFH	Re-opening & Welcoming New Faculty	Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19
Almost all students live in area with good internet coverage (R1)		New SOP & guidelines allow for full-reinstatement of on-campus learning (R1, R2, R3)	Potential to 'attract' some market shares from other schools (R2)
All students have access / own gadgets (R1, R2, R3)			
Enables students in overseas to not miss classes (R2)			

THREATS			
Virtual Learning	WFH	Re-opening & Welcoming New Faculty	Socio-economic Impacts of COVID-19
Risk of another lockdown / MCO (R1, R2, R3)	Risk of another lockdown / MCO (R1, R2, R3)	Keeping up with SOPs from the government (R1, R2, R3)	Parents / families lost their jobs and forced to relocate (R1, R2, R3)
		Change in border regulations (R1, R2)	Risk of another lockdown / MCO (R1, R2, R3)

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION, LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

#### 5.1 Conclusion

Hard, isn't it? Education.

We may belong in different types of schools, different levels of education, but our ultimatum remains the same - Our sense of responsibility as educators often stems from our own realization that every child in the world deserves the privilege of education. Even in the midst of a pandemic, we are doing our best to ensure that students still have access to education - be it formal virtual learning or teachers' own initiative (in public schools for instance).

International or private schools are fortunate in the sense that - they usually operate on a single campus, or 2-3 campuses for certain schools. Hence, all their resources and attention are directed only to those campus(es) that they own. With a proper management structure in place, they are able to plan and navigate their schools through the pandemic. Impacts are inevitable, but they can at least still ensure that in whatever ways, students can still learn - virtual learning, online courses etc. That is why this case study is so important - both as reference, and precedent.

Public schools are totally a different story. We saw and heard stories during the pandemic how public-school teachers improvised their own ways to ensure that their kids can still learn. The government is not ready, and definitely does not have the capacity to initiate virtual learning across the public-school system - the resources are just not there.

Losing access to education, is beyond just losing the privilege of attending schools. Losing proper, on campus education during a pandemic means losing a particular length of time that a child cannot get back. God forbid, if the pandemic is prolonged, it will definitely have a long-term effect on the growth of the children, academically and socially.

Even in international schools that are undergoing virtual learning, not all children can 'claim' back what they miss this year, in the following year - let's not forget the seniors! Grade 12 or final year students last year, they spend the last 5 months of their senior year on virtual learning. They definitely missed some important milestones - competitions, activities etc. that can only be done in the final year. That is something they cannot get back.

The COVID-19 pandemic is very much a wakeup call for the world. It lets us mourn the privileges that we lost, while allowing us to appreciate what we still have. That would be my personal takeaway from this study, and also from personally being part of that journey for almost a year.

At the time of I am writing this section, the school is actually now into the third day of virtual learning again, as per the reinstatement of CMCO (14th October 2020) by the government for the state of Kuala Lumpur, alongside several other states. Let's see how else 2020 can surprise us!

## 5.2 Discussion

### 5.2.1 We are Grateful for What we Have!

Having done all the interviews, understanding and analyzing the pattern of the responses, it is not much of a surprise that IT & technological competencies of the students, teachers and staff, availability of resources, and readiness of the online platform are not a problem for the school - given the socio-economic characteristics of the school's clientele. Just like R3 said, "*in the state of a pandemic, we can see how privileged the students and the school are*" - to have everything they need to operate virtually. Also, the school already has experience in virtual learning over the last decade whenever they had to close down for SARS last time, and the annual haze, and they always have that as a contingency in hand. I experience that transition first hand as an employee, and I can vouch on a personal capacity that the transition was seamless! - but let's not disregard the challenges and some impacts we discussed earlier on.

Virtual learning and working from home have taken a toll on everyone, from teachers to students, staff and parents alike. It affects the quality of communication to a certain degree, and on some level, it frustrates some teachers when they are not able to do 'more' for their students like they always do on-campus to ensure the students have the best learning experience. However, it's amazing to see how the three respondents are being optimistic and realistic at the same time. Everyone just needs to accept the new reality, and get used to the new norm because we are not alone in this fight - the whole world is in it. The school never stops to get feedback, improvise and plan ahead should we need to go on another round of MCO.

On the other hand, virtual learning might not be the simple go-to option for other public, local schools. With hundreds and thousands of students across all the 14 states, it is a hard challenge to ensure all students have the same access to education. There are so many factors clouding it such as geographical - where they live, does the area have good internet connection? Also, there are other questions such as - what about

those students who do not have laptops at home, and their families just can't afford one? But at the same time, it is not to say that students in international schools are not affected - they very much are, and sometimes a lot more drastic, such as when they have to relocate because their families lost jobs, and can no longer afford to stay in the country. This is evident as it was deeply discussed by all three respondents. However, in general, most of them already have the basic necessities to settle in and resume their learning from home.

### **5.2.2 Resilient Leadership, Crisis Management & Transparency**

All the interviews suggested one important theme that is very relevant for this study - *crisis decision-making*. I recall in one of the staff meetings after the school was re-opened sometime in August, the head of school mentioned something along the lines of - *we had some important decisions to make, they have been made, and looking at where we are now, we can say we have made the best, necessary decisions at the time*. Looking at the SWOT figures presented in the previous chapter, all the points tabulated on them were results of those decisions.

There is nothing routine in making decisions in a crisis. Nicholas H. Barker stated in the book titled "Crisis Leadership and Resilience" that given the pace of change and myriad responsibilities of office, senior leaders need to be proficient in all types of decision making - this includes adopting the right method at the right time for the right situation.

In the case of the school, it was evident that it was not a one-man job - as the respondents admitted. Every head of departments and senior officers were part of the decision-making process.

It is much more evident when we analyses through the pattern of the responses - all three respondents were very clear, on the same page, and very detailed in explaining the events that took place prior to the closure during the first MCO, challenges of virtual

learning and staff working from home, up to reopening the school in August. Most importantly - the details are tally in all aspects.

To dissect further, all three respondents also described clearly that there were so many things going on behind the scene prior to the school closure in March 2020 - the brainstorming, planning contingencies, risk identification and mitigation, and setting up of communication plans to all faculty, staff, students and families. According to R3 in his interview, the leaders have been studying trends that were happening to international schools locally and globally to gather inputs that will necessitate a specific course of actions.

That is the reason when the government announced the first MCO out of the blue, we all seamlessly transitioned to virtual learning and working from home. This is a great manifestation of **organizational resilience** in the flesh. This is tally with the principle of organization resilience where it involves *the ability to prepare for systemic disruptions and to cope with both anticipated and unexpected threats*.

Even when the school reopened, every stakeholder has been receiving a series of communications that shed light on what is happening, what will be taking place when the new semester commences. As discussed by all three respondents, the planning ranges from adapting and practicing new norms on campus to offering financial and emotional support to students and families in need. That to me, is very interesting - the leadership and empathy did not only go for the teachers and staff, but the whole school community which involves students and parents as well. Let's not forget, the school also managed the safe entry of about 20 new hires into the country during the course of the MCO.

Now, having the plans is one thing - to communicate those plans is a different matter altogether. I was particularly intrigued how R1 and R3 discussed the need to have a constant flow of communication to all stakeholders, and most importantly - to be transparent. To quote R3, *"Uncertainties are abundant nowadays which is why*



*consistency in communication is utterly important. If things are bad - then people need to hear that."*

At the same time, the respondents in general described how the school realized that the pandemic is not over, and there are just so many uncertainties and external threats, which requires us to be vigilant at all times. To anticipate and acknowledge that the worse might happen again - another MCO - and to always be ready for anything, that there is one of the truest forms of resilient leadership, which is to accept reality.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

In my humble opinion, the school is already doing the best anyone could have, given the circumstances. My only recommendation is to strategize the way forward with more bearing on the mental well-being of students, teachers, and students in case the country is under another round of lockdown / MCO. The reason being, we see already some of the negative impacts during the first round and with such inputs, we can work to minimize those impacts.

### **5.4 Limitations and For Future Study**

A major challenge in performing this case study was the fact that the school is to be kept anonymous for particular reasons. With that in mind, I had to cut out some key details pertaining to the school that would have given an extra depth in understanding the what, why, and how of the responses. Scheduling an interview was not difficult, but will require advance scheduling as in respect to the study, I am required to interview top decision makers in the school. Also due to extreme time constraint and heavy workloads, I only managed to get 3 respondents - fortunately they are at the top of the hierarchy. I did not have the opportunity to engage with the principal and vice principal of elementary school.

I see this case study as a precedent for future research on this topic. The reason being, it is so relevant right now especially to all international schools in the country because we all need a baseline on where to position ourselves, and it's good to learn from a school that did it successfully.

It is recommended to get at least 5 - 7 respondents, depending on the organizational structure of the school. For a school with North American curriculum, it is recommended to get 5 respondents consisting of;

1. Head of School / CEO
2. High School Principal / Vice Principal
3. Middle School Principal / Vice Principal
4. Elementary School Principal / Vice Principal
5. Director of Business Operation

Last but not least, ensure that appropriate legal clearance has been obtained as this kind study may require internal insights and disclosures of financial figures.

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**APPROVAL PAGE**

**TITLE OF PROJECT PAPER : THROUGH THICK & THIN: A CASE STUDY  
OF AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN A  
GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

**NAME OF AUTHOR : MUHAMMAD AFIF AKMAL BIN MOHD  
FADZLY SHAH**

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The undersigned certify that the above candidate has fulfilled the condition of the project paper prepared in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Business Administration (Leadership).

**SUPERVISOR**

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