

Stringent SOPs for researchers

Most educational institutions are ready to open their labs again

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STANDARD operating procedures (SOPs) are already in place at the country's top research universities to welcome back students after face-to-face learning came to a halt when the movement control order (MCO) was announced on March 18.

The Higher Education Ministry is now allowing students who need to be physically present in laboratories, workshops, design studios or need to use specific equipment only available on campus, to return to their respective campuses. A check by *StarEdu* showed that higher education institutions (HEIs) have been busy planning and putting in place strict SOPs to ensure the health and safety of their students and staff.

Several public and private varsities are assuring parents and students that they are well-prepared to prevent the spread of the Covid-19.

Universiti Malaya (UM) deputy vice-chancellor Prof Dr Noorsaadah Abd Rahman said the research-focussed university has produced a 130-page safety guideline for staff and students.

"A regular sanitisation and disinfection schedule must be in place before students can be allowed in.

"All faculties must adhere to the SOPs when it comes to making sure that the facilities like the laboratories for our science, engineering, design and architecture students, are safe for use.

"And students must sanitise themselves before coming into the lab and every time they use common equipment," she said.

She added that only a minimum number of students are allowed to enter the laboratories at any given time.

"Students are given a schedule of when they can use the research facilities. This way, the number of students will be maintained at a minimum in a space, thus enabling social distancing.

"Temperature scanning must be carried out daily before entering facilities.

Students have to disinfect their spaces at least twice daily - before they start work and before they leave for the day," she said.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) acting deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international) Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Farhan Mohd Sadullah said USM is not in a rush to let postgraduate students back and had planned ahead for their gradual return.

"USM will only allow staff to return on June 1, while postgraduate students will only be allowed to return when schools and departments are ready to receive them - probably in the second week of June.



All good: Labs and facilities have been sanitised to prepare for the students' return - File photo

"Only postgraduate students who desperately need to be in the lab are allowed. The rest are encouraged to carry on with activities that can be performed from home," he said, adding that at most, only 30% of postgraduate students will be allowed to resume research on campus.

All applications by postgraduate students to be on campus must be supported by their supervisor, and approved by their respective department heads, he said.

Like all the other HEIs, USM has issued general SOPs and guidelines for laboratory use as part of the new norm post Covid-19.

"Department heads and deans have been asked to prepare their labs according to the Health Ministry and the varsity's SOPs.

"All technical and laboratory staff will be given a briefing by our Safety and Health Department on the preparations needed before these students return," he said.

Noting that staff and student community have been empowered to deal with the new normal since the beginning of the pandemic and the MCO, Prof Ahmad Farhan believes that USM will be able to weather the storm without compromising on the learning experience of its students.

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international) Prof Dr M. Iqbal Saripan said the institution will ensure the SOPs are met by managing the number of postgraduate stu-

dents who will be returning.

"We have a total of 10,000 postgraduate students out of the total student population of 28,000. We cannot let everybody in at once if we want to maintain social distancing.

"Therefore, UPM has decided that only postgraduate students who require access to the labs, studio or sites can go back. The rest who are at the thesis writing stage are not allowed.

"Those who need to use the facilities must be recommended by their supervisors. Their respective faculties will then get approval letters from the School of Graduate Studies," he said.

"By limiting the number, it will be much easier for UPM to manage social distancing and for students to maintain it in the labs," he said.

UPM has developed general SOPs and will be recording the temperature and all the comings and goings of these students, he said, adding that students' work stations will be placed far away from each other.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) vice-chancellor Prof Dr Mohd Hamdi Abd Shukor said staff and students must adhere to the institution's detailed SOPs which can help minimise risk of infection.

"Social distancing and sanitation are a must. The space area of the laboratory will determine how many students are allowed in," he said, adding that all faculties must

ensure that the labs are disinfected prior to allowing their students to enter.

Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) vice-president (research and development and commercialisation) Prof Dr Faidz Abd Rahman said the research-heavy private varsity would only allow postgraduates who need immediate access to the laboratory equipment to resume work.

"The number of people allowed into the lab will be limited to maintain social distancing. Once we receive the government's directive and SOPs, we will make sure that these are adhered to strictly," said Prof Faidz, adding that UTAR also has its own safety SOPs in place.

Delighted that the ministry has finally given the green light for students to return, Sunway Education Group chief executive officer Elizabeth Lee said the education group had its SOPs and safety measures drawn up ahead of time to prep for their return.

"A huge cleaning team has been working hard to clean the campus throughout the MCO. And when our staff members were allowed to come back under the conditional MCO, the laboratories and equipment were sanitised in anticipation of our research students' return.

"All our preparations were done in accordance with the Covid-19 preventative guidelines of the Department of Occupational Safety and Health Malaysia, and those by the other relevant authorities," she said.

Measures taken to prepare for the return of students include frequent disinfection of work areas and surfaces as well as provision of hand-sanitisers throughout campus, designating of workable spaces in the laboratories and other research spaces, repurposing of teaching laboratories to facilitate effective distancing, ensuring social distancing measures in the entire campus, and the compulsory use of face masks on campus.

To keep the varsity's laboratories spick and span, said Lee, work surfaces are sanitised before and after each research is conducted.

"We also have a crew that cleans the general areas, multiple times in a day and they have been doing this throughout the MCO. Staff and students are also encouraged to keep their own work areas clean," she said.

She believes that students will be able to maintain social distancing through awareness-sharing and enforcement by physical designation, possible partitions, mandatory wearing of face masks in public areas and company of others, and active surveillance.

Lee added that most of Sunway's laboratories require an access card which enables a contact trace to be conducted if necessary.