

**Brief Communication**

**CHALLENGES AND WAYS COMBATING COVID-19: EXPERIENCES FROM UNIVERSITI ISLAM ANTARABANGSA SULTAN ABDUL HALIM MU'ADZAM SHAH (UniSHAMS)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*As the coronavirus outbreak surges worldwide, many countries have been facing various challenges in managing this pandemic at the beginning due to lack of experience and expertise. Multiple precautions have been taken include social distancing and travel bans to reduce the spreading of the virus. This incident has produced a great impact to educational institutions to adopt and adapt the changes that have been demanded by the authority, in particular, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and Majlis Keselamatan Negara (MKN). This paper describes the challenges and solutions taken by Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS) in facing the COVID-19 pandemic between March to June 2020.*

**THE BEGINNING OF COVID-19**

On December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, China, a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown origin caused concern among health officials. An alert note was issued by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission and subsequently, a rapid response team was sent to Wuhan by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC). An immediate notification was made known to the World Health Organization (WHO) [1–3]. The likely potential causes including influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV), and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) were excluded. The epidemiological investigation implicated Wuhan's Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was the source, which was shut down and disinfected immediately, and active case finding was initiated and vigorously implemented [1,3,4].

On January 7, 2020, the causative pathogen was identified as a novel coronavirus, and genomic characterization and test method development ensued [4,5]. Now named 2019-nCoV, the virus is distinct from both SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV, yet closely related [4,6]. Early cases suggested that COVID-19 (i.e. the new name for disease caused by the novel coronavirus) may be less severe than SARS and MERS. However, illness onset among rapidly increasing numbers of people and mounting evidence

of human-to-human transmission suggests that 2019-nCoV is more contagious than both SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV [7–10].

On January 20, China's "National Infectious Diseases Law" was amended to make 2019-novel coronavirus diseases (COVID-19) a Class B notifiable disease and its "Frontier Health and Quarantine Law" was amended to support the COVID-19 outbreak response effort. Then, on January 23, the Chinese Government began to limit movement of people in and out of Wuhan and announced its highest-level commitment and mobilized all sectors to respond to the epidemic in preventing further spread of COVID-19. Characterization of the epidemiological features of COVID-19 is crucial for the development and implementation of effective control strategies of the infection.

With the above COVID-19 pandemic chronology events (Figure 1), Malaysia is not exceptional and received her first wave of infection started on the 25 January 2020 as reported in WHO portal and a total of 22 cases were identified, of which 12 had a travel history to affected countries and regions.

**ESTABLISHMENT OF UNISHAMS'S OPERATIONAL AND PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE**

The management of UniSHAMS has been proactive

# CHRONOLOGY OF COVID-19 IN MALAYSIA



Figure 1: Chronological events during COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia

by immediately forming an operational and preparedness committee during the announcement of first MCO. This committee is vital as a think-tanker to coordinate the procedures and regulations during MCO. Furthermore, it placed thousands of students and staff on the campus. This committee was formed at the university level and involved clinicians, nurse staff, finance department staff, students' affairs department staff, welfare department staff and safety department staff.

Among the immediate actions that were taken by the committee include liaising with the nearest health centre for COVID-19 treatment, set up a call-centre in the university for enquiries related to COVID-19, prepared protocol for triage and evaluation of potential COVID-19 patients and equipped hand sanitizers, personal protective equipment (PPE) and temperature scanners to relevant departments.

## SUPPORT TO STUDENTS' WELFARE

The closure of the university since the beginning of the MCO in mid-March is undeniably an important public health measure taken by the government for the safety of students, staff and the community [11]. Dealing with uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on the students' physical and mental wellbeing [12]. University has in-house psychiatrists and counsellors to provide short-term professional counselling to students and staff who experienced distress or anxiety related to pandemic.

The University has made it a top priority to monitor the welfare of stranded students on campus with the assistance of student council members and staff from various departments. On-campus and out-campus student databases have been documented for communication purpose and distribution of food. During this period, students had received meals and food packages from UniSHAMS and various non-governmental organisations (NGO). Concerning the students' movement, students were restricted from entering and leaving campus, except for emergency purposes following standard operation procedure prepared by the Ministry of Higher Education.

## PREPARATION OF HAND SANITIZER AND PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

In the fight against COVID-19, the basic principle of infection control is to isolate the source and break the chain of infection. In addition to training the university community on social distance, the proper techniques for the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers and the washing of hands with soap and water were also reinforced, together with the use of standard face masks provided by the university.

During this pandemic, the prices of hand sanitizers had risen with their limited supply [13]. Hence, the university took proactive action by preparing in-house hand sanitizers in accordance with the WHO guidelines. The PPE, which includes N95 respirators, long-sleeved insulation gowns, gloves and disposable face shields, are also limited in number but already available, in particular, to staff providing treatment and care for potential COVID-19 patients.

## SICK OR EXPOSED STUDENTS AND STAFF

Students who have symptoms of influenza-like illness (ILI) such as fever and cough are isolated in an assigned insulation room and taken to the nearest health clinic for further examination. This process will require a full PPE driver and a van with having windows that open to minimize the risk of transmission. The sanitation process will be carried out on the person involved and on the transport immediately after the procedure has been completed. Between the 18th of March and the 10th of June, no students or staffs were identified with COVID-19 positive.

## RETURNING HOME

MOHE announced permission for students to return to their home by following the SOP on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020 [14]. The procedure for transporting students was strictly monitored by the Majlis Keselamatan Negara (MKN) and Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). The health declaration form has been filled out by the students to confirm that they have no influenza-like symptoms and in good condition to return home. The liaison officers accompanied the students on the bus until they reached their destination. These officers were responsible for monitoring students to follow social distances and to comply with the use of face masks and hand sanitizers. The passing of the students to their parents took place at local Ibu Pejabat Polis Daerah (IPD) following the standard operation procedure.

## MOVING FORWARD

This unprecedented global crisis has caused significant impacts on various sectors including educational sectors. It has changed many traditions and daily life routines leading us to live in the new norms. Cases of people infected with COVID-19 are still being reported until today, hence caused UniSHAMS to always be prepared and put the priority on safety and hygiene aspects for the benefits of everyone.

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