Higher education for the creation of prosperity, sustainability in security and development in times of COVID-19 pandemic: A case study

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Abstract

Higher education has an important role in contributing to the creation of prosperity and alleviate poverty in society by enhancing the quality of life of the students. Past studies indicate that prosperity can be attained through the sustainability in security and development, in the sense which resources are effectively and efficiently managed for the state and its society. The creation of the state's prosperity includes the development of human capital through the platform of education. However, the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak had disrupted higher education sector. In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO) or 'Malaysia lockdown' was declared by the authority starting from March 18, 2020, to curb the spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 outbreak and MCO restriction disrupted the higher education stakeholders to 'normally' continue with their academic activities. The disruption of the academic activities has affected the students' well-being and welfare, especially those from the bottom billion families. The main aim of the study is to obtain a preliminary understanding of the students' experiences on their well-being and welfare during the MCO in times of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. The study was conducted during the first phase of the MCO period from 18 to 31 March using multiple Phone Calls interviews. Thirty-three (33) respondents from Bottom40 families participated in the study. The study managed to gather twenty (20) variables clustered in the 'Prosperity Quadrant for Sustainability in Security and Development during the MCO in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic' based on experiences highlighted by the respondents from B40 families. The preliminary findings obtained in the study could provide valuable insights for the decision-makers of HEIs in prioritizing their strategic short, middle and long-term planning in a time of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

Keywords: Higher Education, Prosperity, Student Experiences, Bottom40, Security and Development


1.1 Introduction

The creation of prosperity for a state means 'freedom' from a threat that includes in aspects of health, politics, economy, society, military as well as environmental. In the creation of prosperity, the Second Prime Minister of Malaysia also known as the Father of Development, Tun Abdul Razak emphasized the crucial need of security and development initiatives in a time of state's crisis. Development can be defined as a process of attaining sustainability between the goals of economic goals (human development) and the social goals of human well-being and welfare (human security). It is just like a fragrance and colourful 'potpourri', whereby the economic, health, political, diplomatic, security apparatus, environmental and societal interact harmoniously. Based on the Malaysia historical experiences and context, development is vital in the conceptualization of security of the
state. Four decades ago, Razak¹ mentioned each state had its own ‘unique’ statecraft in managing its population, sovereignty and territory.

The state must develop according to its own ‘light’ with the need for an articulated political and economic systems in addressing the arising problems in managing the ‘threat’ in time of crisis. The prosperity can be attained through the sustainability in security and development, in the sense which resources are effectively managed for the state and its society. The creation of the ‘wealth of the state’s prosperity’ includes the ‘development in human capital’ through the platform of education. Recently, the threat of human coronaviruses (HCoVs) outbreaks disrupted the livelihood of human beings and their environment throughout the world. According to Paules, Marston and Fauci (2020), in December 2019, yet another pathogenic HCoV, 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) was recognized in Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the initial outbreak and has caused serious illness and death to the human being. The disease is officially named as Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19), by World Health Organization on February 11, 2020 whereby person-to-person transmission. Currently, the disease may occur through droplets or contact transmission and currently, there is no definite treatment for COVID-19 although some drugs are under investigation (Wu, Chen & Chan, 2020).

Among the sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic is higher education. In Malaysia, the Movement Control Order (MCO) or ‘Malaysia lockdown’ was declared by the authority on March 18, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak crisis. The MCO restriction disrupted the higher education students to ‘normally’ continue with their academic activities in the university campuses. The COVID-19 pandemic affected more than 1.3 million students at various stages of their higher education journey and 80,000 students are stuck at the university campuses during the MCO period (Najmie, 2020). The disruption of the academic activities, thus affected the students’ well-being and welfare, and most likely affected the students from the bottom billion families. These lower-income groups are classified as Bottom 40 (B40) which comprises the families with household earning monthly income below RM3,855 (Nor Fatimah, Nur Azura & Suriyani, 2020).

**Theoretical Bases**

### 2.1 Higher Education for Creation of Prosperity and Alleviation of Poverty

Higher education is a ‘pathway’ to create prosperity and alleviate poverty in society by enhancing the quality of life of the students. Poverty is believed to create negative impacts towards academic achievements and the most important factor that influences the academic attainment of the students is the household income as based on the past studies indicated that there are significant positive relationships if the household income is low, the academic attainment of the students is also low (Chandran & Geetha, 2009). Thus, higher education can weaken the impact of poverty in these groups by offering a suitable mechanism to improve their capabilities and capacities in obtaining useful knowledge and skills. Higher education is one of the sectors that have the capacities to contribute to the creation of prosperity and wealth for the state and its society. The students are the most important stakeholder and a primary consumer in higher education. Adair (2001) highlighted the crucial role of higher education is to help rather than hinder the welfare of students especially from the marginalized² groups.

Most of these students have access to higher education. However, because of obstacles such as finance, material, family, culture and pedagogy, they are lagging academically, and some are not able to complete their

¹Referring to the Second Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak.
²Marginalized groups cited from Adair (2001) are students from low-income and single-mother families.

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tertiary education successfully. In 2015, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin\(^3\), the then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education Malaysia emphasized in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) that the government has set aspirations to transform the higher education system in two aspects, the first aspect, for the education as a whole by focusing on access, quality, unity, and efficiency, and second, for individual students covering the attributes consisting of ethics and spirituality, leadership skills, national identity, language proficiency, thinking skills and knowledge. Thus, the creation of prosperity contributed by the higher education is to empower the development of their students intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and psychically to fulfil the state's talents needs.

Malaysians are categorized into three household monthly income groups known as Top 20\% (T20), Middle 40\% (M40) and Bottom 40\% (B40). In the context of Malaysia, one of the crucial contributions of higher education in the creation of prosperity is to transform their students from the marginalized groups of B40 towards the middle-class society. The Mid-Term Review of the Eleventh Malaysian Plan (2016-2020) acknowledges that income gap is widening at an alarming rate as about 2.78 million households out of the total 7.6 million households are classified in the group of B40. Among the main priority highlighted in the Plan is to raise the income and purchasing power of B40 households. Illustrate below in Figure 1 below illustrate the Creation of Prosperity by Transforming B40 for the Future Preparation for Malaysia to be Developed State with High Income Society.

![Figure 1 Creation of Prosperity by Transforming Majority B40 for the Future Preparation for Malaysia to be Developed State with High Income Society](image)

In empowering their students, HEIs should play a major role that includes functioning as socially responsible institutions, educating their students in the values, knowledge and attitudes relative to the concept of a decent society according to human dignity and basic social justice, both nationally and internationally, and also preparing the students to be technically competent and socially active professionals as an agent of sustainability (Sanz, Peris & Escamez, 2017).

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\(^3\)In March 2020 appointed as the 8\textsuperscript{th} Prime Minister of Malaysia.
2.2 Sustainability in Security and Development in Times of Crisis

In 1987, Brundtland in her report entitled ‘Our Common Future- Call for Action’ stressed out that humanity has reached a crossroads and the changes that are taking place in The Biosphere⁴ are outstripping the human present ability to cope with the cause of a problem. The important guise of Brundtland Report emphasizing on the necessity to embrace ‘change’ as the ‘present' development is not sustainable. The report defines sustainable development as ‘the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. Albeit, the Brundtland’s definition is important in the study, nevertheless, the study further discusses the sustainability in two interconnected aspects, security and development.

In the Malaysian historical context, the Father of Development, Tun Abdul Razak highlighted that development is intertwined with the security. One of the important historical events that was hardly ignored was the Second Emergency. It refers to the times of Malaysia was facing a challenging crisis in countering with the armed communist extremists, poverty and communal tension aftermath the racial riot 13 May 1969. During the Second Emergency, higher education played a pivotal role in supporting the state’s policies and agenda in countering with the threats of armed communist extremists, poverty and communalism. For instance, in the aspect of legislation, to ensure the ‘continuity’ in higher education during the state crisis, ‘change’ had been introduced to the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 (UUCA), or AktaUniversiti dan KolejUniversiti 1971 (AUKU) in Malay language. The AUKU 1971 (Amendment) 1975 managed to indirectly change the university students behaviours and attitudes from being radical to be more ‘moderate’ and disciplined especially in discussing the sensitives issues with good manners in public during the time of crisis. The university students had to be focus seriously on academic matters as the Act played a significant role in boosting and empowering the production of semi-professional and professional manpowers to the industries as enshrined in the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Higher education assisted the state’s long-term socio-economic policy, NEP which was introduced by Razak in his ‘security and development’ strategy in the quest to alleviate the poverty, and at the same time to counter the armed communist extremists and communal tension in the multiethnic society. In term of socioeconomic impact, the NEP managed to reduce the poverty rate from 49.3 per cent in 1970 to 16 per cent in 1990. Although some have argued against the reliability of these figures, however, in terms of poverty eradication, NEP did a resounding success (Muhammad Abdul Khalid, 2018). Observing from the past lesson is necessary as history is instructive, and the higher education sector has an important role in assisting the state in the creation of prosperity and wealth through ‘empowering the strategies’ of the sustainability in security and development in a time of crisis, as illustrated in Figure 2 Razak’s Sustainability in Security and Development in Times of Crisis in the context of Higher Education Sector. Although in the beginning, the strategies introduced by Razak’s administration during the state’s crisis was criticized, in the end, the outcome was a remarkable success⁵.

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⁴Major unintended changes that are occurring in the atmosphere, in soil, in water, among plants and animals and in the relationships among them (Brundtland, 1987).
⁵Established a Grand Strategy in time of State crisis during the Second Emergency.
2.3 COVID-19 Pandemic, Students’ Well-being and Welfare

COVID-19 pandemic imposed a significant challenge to the state. According to World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus and these coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals and humans (WHO, 2020). WHO announced that COVID-19 is now categorized as a pandemic affecting many states globally. The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of just how interconnected the world is as the disease has cut a broad swath across the globe and the infections continue to rise in developed and developing states rendering distinctions of wealth, poverty, nationality, race and class meaningless (Ramaphosa, 2020).

In Malaysia, there were 2,766 total cases of COVID-19 highlighted by the Ministry of Health Malaysia on 31 March 2020, the last day of MCO First-Phase. Movement Control Order (MCO) First-Phase was imposed on 18 March 2020 to curb the infiltration of COVID-19 and ‘flatten the curve’ to prevent health care systems from being overwhelmed. According to Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, restricted activities order under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Disease Act 1988 and Police Act 1967 includes the closure of all public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) and skill training institutions (New Straits Times, 2020). The closure of HEIs during the COVID-19 thus affected the higher education sector and its stakeholders especially to the students from the B40 families. The consequences of the global health crisis of COVID-19 towards higher education are complex. There is an increase in the level of difficulties faced by the students from low-income families during the MCO in times of COVID-19 pandemic.

Students’ well-being can be bolstered by the assistance and support they receive in times of disruption. Therefore, taking good care of the well-being and welfare of these students is essential to ensure the continuity of the higher education sector inguiding the students’ academic advancement. There is no trade-off in providing an 'effective' welfare system for the students to sustain themselves academically without jeopardizing their good health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students’ well-being in a time of crisis is tied to their access to welfare.
assistance and ‘vulnerabilities’ to their change in environment. Well-being is seen as cognitive, affective and material that involves reflections on individual experience and social circumstances with the subjective feelings about the quality and substances of those experiences (Taylor, 2011). To ‘be well’ alongside to ‘do well’, it raises a question of human meaning, happiness, personal experiences and social recognition as well as access to material goods and resources. According to Shah and Marks (2004), well-being means developing as a person, being fulfilled and making a contribution to the community, applying in the study, where the students are happy, healthy, capable and engaged, especially in the time of crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Well-being is closely related with the state of happiness, in measuring happiness, Shahar (2007) constructed a ‘Happiness Quadrant’, as he highlighted some suffering is unavoidable in life for instance living in conflict area, under political oppression or in extreme poverty. Therefore, better understanding of the nature of happiness is necessary by applying certain ideas can help most people in most situations become happier. Shahar constructed ‘Happiness Quadrant’ by clustering positive and negative experiences to enhance the quality of life. According to Veehoven (2000) the phrase quality of life refers in some contexts to the quality of society and in other instances to the happiness of its citizen reflected in the quadrant – four quality of life, which are livability of environment, utility of life, life-ability of the person and appreciation with life.

3.1 Objectives

The main aim of the study is to obtain a preliminary understanding of the student’s experiences on their well-being and welfare during the MCO restriction in times of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Specifically the study intends to explore the students’ experiences on four aspects:-

1- Academic Activities
2- Psychology and Health
3- Basic Necessities
4- Material Support and Assistance

Although, the COVID-19 pandemic affected all, nevertheless, the students from B40 families are likely to be affected the most during MCO in times of COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

4.1 Respondents

The study was conducted during the First-Phase of MCO, which was implemented for two weeks from 18 to 31 March 2020. The study employs qualitative methodology using multiple interview sessions (within 20 minutes, accumulatively 30 minutes for each respondent for thrice Phone Calls sessions) was conducted via Phone Calls due to MCO restriction and based on the convenience of respondents. Respondents are the students from the B40 families from the public HEIs situated in Central Region, Malaysia. Thirty-three (33) respondents voluntarily participated in the study. The study used a small number of respondents allows the study to grasp the comprehensive experiences and valuable insights from B40 students.
4.2 Conceptualize the Constructed Quadrant

The quadrant (refer to Figure 3- Constructed Quadrant for interview session) was constructed in advance as a guideline for the interview session with the respondents. Initially, the quadrant was emulated from past studies conducted by Shahar (2007) and Veehoven (2000) with modification. The purpose to have the constructed quadrant is to highlight the experiences of the students during the MCO period in the times of COVID-19 pandemic. All the listed variables in the Quadrant are regarded as important. However, the HEIs should prioritize the ‘urgency’ of each variable mentioned by the respondents. The quadrant could be the basis for the policymakers of HEIs to provide assistance and appropriate preparation for the short, medium and long-term planning for the B40 students.

![Figure 3 Clustering Students’Well-Being and Welfare in the Constructed Quadrant](image-url)
The interview sessions were conducted thrice through Phone Calls for each of respondents due to the limitation of movement during the MCO. The procedure of interview as in Table 1 *Flow of Interview Sessions in Clustering Students’ Well-Being and Welfare*.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Phone Call</th>
<th>Second Phone Call</th>
<th>Third Phone Call</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STEP 1 (Top Left)</td>
<td>STEP II (Top Right)</td>
<td>STEP III (Bottom Right)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The students’ experience in four aspects: academic activities, psychology and health, basic necessities and material supports and assistances.</td>
<td>Compiling all the variables based on the feedbacks: Positive and Negative.</td>
<td>Clustering all the variables mentioned by respondents based on the urgency.</td>
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Clustering either Positive (White) or Negative (Black).

| Table 1 | Flow of Interview Sessions in Clustering Students’ Well-Being and Welfare |

### 5.1 Findings and Discussions

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<tr>
<th>POSITIVE</th>
<th>URGENT</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Food</td>
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<td>Facilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
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<td>Health Screening</td>
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<td>Updated Information in University Website &amp; Social Media</td>
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<td>Mindset Transformation</td>
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<tr>
<th>NEGATIVE</th>
<th>URGENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Digital Divide</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychological &amp; Emotional Support</td>
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<td>Material &amp; Financial Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
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<td>Hate Speech</td>
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<td>Task Force</td>
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<td>Community Engagement</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>POSITIVE</th>
<th>NOT URGENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wildlife and Animal Awareness</td>
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<td>Leadership and Mentoring</td>
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<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
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<th>NEGATIVE</th>
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<td>Library Access</td>
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<td>Industrial Engagement</td>
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<td>Digital Wellness</td>
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The findings have been analysed and classified based on the respondents’ experience in the constructed quadrant (refer to Figure 4 - Prosperity Quadrant for Sustainability in Security and Development during the MCO in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic). They are classified into Positive and Negative Variables based on the
‘urgency’. There are twenty (20) variables highlighted by the respondents as in Figure 2—Prosperity Quadrant for Sustainability in Security and Development during the MCO in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic.

The interview sessions via multiple Phone Calls were conducted during the First-Phase of MCO (March 18 to 31, 2020). More than half the respondents were stranded in the university hostels and rental houses around the university campuses. Their main concerns at the beginning of MCO were classified in the Positive-Urgent Quadrant, mainly on the supply of the necessities of foods, due to the ‘panic buying’ from the masses at the early First-Phase of MCO which created ‘tense’ and ‘anxiety’ among these group of respondents. Nutritious and healthy foods are important for the well-being of the students in facing global health pandemic. Similarly, the availability and accessibility of the facilities such as accommodations, access to the Internet, Television, Computers were also concern to the respondents as many of respondents do not have personal computers or Laptops. Nevertheless, a majority of them have personal mobile phones.

The respondents also expressed their concerns on the availability of the health screening provided to them as precaution and prevention to curb the spread of COVID-19. Cleanliness of the public facilities and hostel areas is vital, cleaning and disinfecting all the facilities.

The dissemination of an accurate information from the university to their students on COVID-19 pandemic. The updated and latest information on COVID-19 outbreak and university activities, programs, plans, policies, support and assistance should be highlighted in the official University Website and Social Media for quicker diffusion of information. It is also to prevent the disperse of ‘fake news’ and ‘rumours’ that may cause tension, anxiety and panic. Mindset transformation is another important variable that needs to be addressed accordingly. For the HEIs, MCO restriction is not the barrier to discontinue the teaching and learning of academic activities. The disruption of COVID-19 pandemic should initially instigate the ‘creative, innovative and agility’ minds of university stakeholders to navigate as smooth transition of a ‘New Normal’ by adopting new behaviours by breaking old habits approaches of academic activities during the MCO in times of COVID-19 pandemic.

The Negative-Urgent Quadrant highlighted the seriousness of ‘digital divide’ among the students from the low-income families in HEIs. The term refers to the great disparities between and within societies in the use of digital technology (Holmes, 2003). It is important to the students from B40 families to have access to the Internet for the continuity of their academic activities during the MCO such as participating in online learning. Apart from that, online learning pedagogy and materials should have to be more attractive and interesting for the students.

The respondents emphasized on psychological and emotional supports from the HEIs as most of them still at the ‘stage of trauma’ with the COVID-19 outbreak. The material supports such as providing hand sanitizer and soap in the campus areas, and even the face mask should be made easily available and compulsorily to be used during the MCO. Financial support should be made available to the students from B40 families as majority of them are badly affected from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, although, through the ‘PRIHATIN Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package’ the government allocated one-off payment RM200 cash to the university students, the payment is yet to be received at the end of April 2020. The government has allocated RM270 million of the RM250 billion stimulus package for this initiative (Arumugam, 2020).

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6 Adapting to New Normal, for example, in ensuring the continuity of higher education sector core business, maximize the use of online, mobile and virtual alternatives instead of in-person academic activities in affected areas of COVID-19.
The positive and calm attitudes are necessary in times of COVID-19 outbreak to avoid unnecessary panic, anxiety and tension among the students. Monitoring the online and offline hate speech in reducing the spreading of inaccurate information or ‘fake news’ and ‘rumours’ regarding the situation in times of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak is important. The formation of a Taskforce to manage the student's well-being and welfare in HEIs is necessary to reduce bureaucracy and maximize the effectiveness as well as efficiency in managing the crisis. The students, as an important stakeholder for the HEIs are the ‘lifetime university ambassadors’ in creating a good image of the HEIs, locally and internationally. Therefore, taking care of their well-being and welfare is necessary. Apart from obtaining their views, experiences and expectations are most crucial and precious during the global crisis of COVID-19.

Another urgent variable listed is the community engagement, according to Munir and Siti Norbaya (2017) community engagement offers enormous benefits for local, regional and international development, and with the engagement, HEIs will be able to assist with specific research, encourage volunteer service and offer training programs to various community groups and universities can contribute not just in economic growth but also enhancing the community’s quality of life as in many states, community engagement is needed to confront various social problems and extreme poverty. Munir and Siti Norbaya (2017) study revealed that mobile learning or M-learning are indeed just a right toll and ‘now’ technology that can reach a wide range of communities, especially the marginalized groups. In time of COVID-19 pandemic, M-learning can be the medium to educate the communities for example adaption of the ‘New Normal’ such as practising social distancing in the public spaces. In this global health crisis, ‘nobody is safe until everyone is safe’, thus, university-community engagement is necessary in educating the communities. In a time of crisis, generosity is crucial, as the respondents highlighted their ‘concern’ on the ‘uncertainty’ of their future and families. There are supposed to be the ‘agent of change’ in changing the fate of their low-income families. There are hoping that the HEIs can educate the community on the importance of empathy and compassion in helping and assisting the welfare of the marginalized groups in times of COVID-19 pandemic.

The variables listed in Positive-Not Urgent Quadrant include wildlife and animal awareness, leadership and mentoring, as well as entrepreneurship. There are four variables listed in the Negative- Not Urgent Quadrant including library accessibility, industrial engagement and digital wellness. The identified variables listed in the Prosperity Quadrant for Sustainability in Security and Development during the MCO in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic are treated ALL Important, nevertheless, differences in its urgency. The quadrant could facilitate as a guideline for the management of HEIs in prioritizing their strategic planning in times of crisis for future references.

6.1 Conclusion

The study managed to construct a fundamental framework of the ‘Prosperity Quadrant for Sustainability in Security and Development during the MCO in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic’ based on experiences highlighted by the students from B40 families. The MCO was extended from the First-Phase (18-31, March 2020), Second-Phase (1-14 April 2020) to the Third-Phase, another two weeks durations (15-28, April 2020) and if there are any possibility of another extension of MCO, the extra priority and monitoring should be given to the group of
students from B40 families. As a fundamental case study, the preliminary findings could be the basis to understand students’ experiences on well-being and welfare during the time of crisis, precisely the students from the bottom billion families with the limitation of resources, assistance and supports.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2015-2025 (Higher Education) highlighted that access to higher education has increased substantially. However, the studies by Adair (2001) revealed that obstacles such as finance, material, familial, cultural and pedagogical obstacles have contributed to the deteriorating performance of the students from the marginalized groups to perform well academically, even some are not able to complete their tertiary education. In the global health crisis, the higher education sector has the responsibility for protecting the well-being and welfare of their students and at the same time, ensuring the continuity of its core business in the development of its student’s academic advancement. As the 'pathway' sector in the creation of prosperity and alleviation of poverty for the state, the sustainability in security and development strategies is necessary for the higher education. The study highlighted twenty (20) variables which are considered important in ensuring the well-being and welfare of the students from the B40 families. The Prosperity Quadrant for Sustainability in Security and Development during the MCO in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic as illustrated in Figure 4 could be a basic reference for the decision-makers to formulate appropriate short, middle and long terms strategies in a time of global health crisis, in this case, COVID-19 pandemic.

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