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The COVID-19 Challenge: An Update from Singapore

By [Rick Smith](#) | April 16, 2020

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While Singapore was the location of the film Crazy Rich Asians, a more current view of the city-state might be better described as Crazy Vigilant Singaporeans! The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our world, yet the preparation, rapid response, and overall vigilance of the universities and the government in Singapore is worth noting. In fact, the World Health Organization has stated that Singapore is the “Gold Standard” for managing a pandemic. From the view of a business school in Singapore, the challenge can be viewed in phases.

Anticipation and Forecast

On 21 January, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was made in the USA. While there were no cases in Singapore at that time, emergency planning meetings had already started taking place as the busy Chinese New Year holiday was approaching. The idea that this could be a pandemic was already shared and university leaders were alerted. With the SARS impact in mind, the universities started preparing for contact tracing, temperature taking, travel declarations, and communication management.

Proactive Planning

After SARS outbreak, the Singapore government ensured that the universities have risk management plans that include a pandemic response. For the past 8 years, all faculty must complete mandatory online teaching training and conduct at least one virtual lesson each term remotely as part of the compliance with emergency preparedness measures. Upon joining, the university, all faculty and staff are issued a personal thermometer for reporting temperature. To track the movement of employees, a system of travel declaration is ready for deployment as needed. While no amount of planning can prepare for the unknown, this vigilant approach is showing benefit in Singapore.

Wave One Measures

With many of our Chinese students returning to China for the annual New Year holiday festivities and many Chinese visitors coming to visit Singapore, the emergency response plan was triggered in the universities. Self-quarantine measures were put in place for anyone returning from China, temperature screening started, and travel declaration forms were required for all students, faculty, and staff. Contact tracing measures were immediately put in place as faculty were required to take photos of each class sessions and carefully document student group activities. The staff and leadership teams immediately went to a split team arrangement to avoid contact risks. In addition, large classes over 50 students immediately moved to an online format.

Early Success

Singapore was aggressive in testing and rapid in the response. Most importantly, the general public knew all too well what was required with social distancing. In the business school, we had some “Near Miss” cases, but the early containment of the outbreak worked well thanks to the vigilance of the well-prepared team. Due to the rapid response, there were no virus infections transferred in any of the Singapore universities. However, the issue of our returning 400 students scattered around the world on exchange programmes along with the planned overseas programme trips became new challenges.

Second Wave

As Singaporeans and our overseas students began to return to the island from the US and the UK, they brought with them the second wave of COVID-19. This time, it was too challenging to contain. In the business school, we had no cases, but we were alerted that we need to prepare for campus closure. Of course, faculty generally have a view that university rules do not actually apply to them... so this group became a challenge as we had to explain multiple times that they could not come to campus in the future. This all became much clearer when the Prime Minister announced a “Circuit Breaker” exercise (modified lock-down) for the nation for a month.

Current State

All classes are running in the on-line mode and all exams are being conducted virtually. Faculty and student travel will not be permitted for the remainder of the calendar year. Overseas study missions, faculty hiring, exchange programmes, and international research activities are all put on hold. Graduation, open house, freshman orientation, sporting events, summer study programmes have all moved to a virtual mode. As businesses feel the impact, the ability of our graduating students to find jobs is a significant challenge as even those with simple internships are being sent home. We hope that this is a temporary “new normal.”

The government of Singapore has advised the universities to think about this pandemic in terms of years – not weeks and months. As a business school, we are grappling with this concept as we rely so much on the international network of business schools for our student experience, faculty research, and global collaboration. At the same time, we are doubling up on our investment in online courses as an alternative study pathway for the future. As the global situation develops, each business school and country will address the pandemic in their own unique way. Perhaps this overview from the Crazy Vigilant Singaporeans can provide some benefit to others.