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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GLOBAL TEAM IN EFFECTIVE PROBLEM
SOLVING

LECTURER'S NAME:

DR. EMMA ROBERTS

GROUP MEMBERS:

No	Full Name	Correct ID No
1.	MUHAMMAD FACHRUL HAKIM	2436806
2.	NABIHAH HANNAH BINTI ABDUL HANIM	2436794
3.	UZAIR ARMAN BIN MOHAMMAD	2423913
4.	GOH ZHE XIAN	2423907

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Indicative Content

1.0. Wicked Problem

Unemployment During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia: A Wicked Problem and Policy Responses

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic generated one of the most significant unemployment crises in Malaysia's modern history, revealing deep structural vulnerabilities within its labour market. Unemployment rose to levels unseen since the mid-1980s, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups, particularly youth, informal workers, and migrants. This paper frames the unemployment crisis as a *wicked problem* characterised by complex interdependencies, stakeholder conflicts, and solutions that are neither straightforward nor permanent (Rittel & Webber, 1973). It examines the multifaceted drivers of unemployment during the pandemic, unpacks the distributional and sectoral complexities, and evaluates the Malaysian government's stimulus and social protection responses. While fiscal interventions such as PRIHATIN, PENJANA, PERMAI, and PEMULIH provided critical short-term relief, structural gaps in social protection, skills mismatches, and administrative fragmentation limited their reach. The analysis concludes with recommendations for adaptive, inclusive, and long-term labour-market strategies that integrate fiscal prudence, institutional reform, and social-psychological recovery.

A. Introduction

The onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 disrupted Malaysia's economy on a scale unmatched since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. As the government implemented Movement Control Orders (MCOs) to contain viral transmission, economic activity contracted sharply, causing widespread job losses, business closures, and income insecurity (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2020). The official unemployment rate peaked at 5.3% in May 2020 its highest in over three decades translating to more than 826,000 unemployed individuals (The Edge, 2020).

Unlike cyclical unemployment triggered by market downturns, pandemic-era unemployment in Malaysia arose from a compound shock: an abrupt halt in demand, disruptions to global supply chains, and restrictions on labour mobility, all occurring alongside a public health emergency. These conditions produced problems that were not merely technical but deeply entangled with governance, equity, and long-term development hallmarks of what policy scholars term a *wicked problem* (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

This paper examines unemployment during COVID-19 in Malaysia through this conceptual lens. Section 2 explores the “wickedness” of the problem, breaking it into thematic dimensions. Section 3 reviews the government's key policy responses. Section 4 critically assesses their effectiveness and limitations. Section 5 proposes policy directions for building labour-market resilience, and Section 6 concludes.

B. The Wicked Problem of Unemployment During COVID-19 in Malaysia

i.) Defining a Wicked Problem

Wicked problems resist straightforward solutions because they have no single, objectively correct answer; each attempted remedy alters the problem itself (Rittel & Webber, 1973). COVID-19 unemployment in Malaysia meets this definition:

- The causes were multifaceted, spanning epidemiological, economic, and institutional domains.
- Stakeholders (employers, employees, informal workers, migrants, government bodies) had competing needs.
- Policy interventions inevitably produced trade-offs, benefiting some groups while disadvantaging others.

ii.) Heterogeneity of Impacts and Distributional Complexity

The pandemic's labour-market shock was asymmetrical.

- Sectoral disparities: Tourism, hospitality, retail, and aviation experienced mass layoffs due to movement restrictions and border closures. The tourism sector alone lost an estimated RM100 billion in revenue in 2020 (Tourism Malaysia, 2021). By contrast, ICT, finance, and some professional services adapted to remote operations, maintaining relative stability.
- Demographic disparities: Youth unemployment reached 13.9% in 2020, more than double the national average (DOSM, 2021). Graduate underemployment surged, with many degree holders taking lower-skilled jobs to secure income.
- Informal economy vulnerability: Informal workers estimated at 24% of Malaysia's workforce faced the double disadvantage of income loss and exclusion from contributory social protection schemes (UNCTAD, 2021).
- Migrant workers: Concentrated in low-wage, high-risk sectors, migrants were among the first to be retrenched and had minimal access to relief measures (REFSA, 2021). The diversity of affected groups made uniform policy design nearly impossible, as interventions optimised for one group often failed another.

iii.) Informational, Administrative, and Delivery Frictions

Rapid deployment of aid required accurate targeting yet Malaysia's social-protection data systems are fragmented. Databases for EPF, PERKESO, Inland Revenue Board, and Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH) recipients are not fully integrated. This caused:

- Delays in verifying eligibility for informal workers without tax or payroll records.
- Exclusion of those without digital literacy or internet access, particularly in rural Sabah and Sarawak.
- Duplication of aid in some cases, while other eligible households received nothing.
- Delivery bottlenecks undermined the timeliness of relief, reducing the effectiveness of counter-cyclical stimulus at the height of lockdowns.

iv.) Long-Run Scarring and Structural Shifts

Prolonged unemployment damages human capital, reducing future employability. In Malaysia:

- Young jobseekers graduating during the pandemic faced delayed hiring cycles, forcing many into precarious gig work.
- Women in the workforce were disproportionately affected due to care responsibilities during school closures, leading to workforce exit.
- Structural shifts such as automation adoption in manufacturing risked making some job losses permanent (World Bank, 2021).
- Wage subsidies, while cushioning immediate layoffs, sometimes preserved jobs in sectors unlikely to recover fully, delaying necessary labour reallocations.

v.) Fiscal Constraints and Competing Priorities

Malaysia introduced fiscal packages totalling more than RM300 billion across 2020–2021 (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2021). While necessary for stabilisation, these measures widened fiscal deficits to 6.2% of GDP in 2020. The government had to balance:

Immediate relief (wage subsidies, cash transfers).

- Public health spending (vaccines, hospital capacity).
- Longer-term recovery investments (digital infrastructure, skills training).
- The absence of fiscal buffers limited the government's ability to sustain generous relief beyond 2021 without compromising debt sustainability.

vi.) Institutional Fragmentation, Governance, and Political Pressures

Multiple ministries and agencies Human Resources, Finance, International Trade, EPF, PERKESO had overlapping roles in relief delivery. Coordination gaps led to inconsistent implementation across states. Political instability during 2020–2021 further complicated decision-making, encouraging high-visibility cash aid at the expense of less visible, long-term reforms.

vii.) Migrant Labour and Sectoral Supply-Side Complexities

Malaysia's reliance on 1.6 million documented migrant workers (and many undocumented) created paradoxes: even as unemployment rose among Malaysians, sectors like palm-oil plantations faced labour shortages due to border closures. Skill mismatches, wage expectations, and job conditions made substituting local labour challenging.

viii.) Psychosocial and Social-Welfare Feedback Loops

Unemployment fuelled mental health deterioration, with the Ministry of Health reporting a 35% rise in calls to its psychosocial helpline in 2020 (MOH, 2021). Financial strain increased domestic conflict and reduced job-search efficacy. Most economic aid packages lacked integrated mental-health or career-counselling components, overlooking the interdependence of psychological and economic recovery.

C. Government Responses

i.) National-Level Relief and Fiscal Stimulus

1. PRIHATIN (“Caring Package”) – March 2020

In response to the sudden economic shock, the Malaysian federal government unveiled the PRIHATIN stimulus, worth approximately RM250 billion. Key components included:

- Emergency healthcare allocations: RM600 million for medical equipment and contract personnel; enhanced monthly allowances for frontliners: RM400 for healthcare staff, RM200 to immigration, customs, and RELA personnel .
- Cash transfers: Up to RM1,600 per household (graded by income), RM800 to individuals earning low incomes, and RM500 for university students .

- Wage Subsidy Programme: Employers receiving RM600/month per employee earning $\leq$ RM4,000, contingent on no layoffs or unpaid leave for three months; eligibility required at least a 50% income drop since Jan 1 .
- EPF withdrawals: Contributors allowed to draw RM500 per month for 12 months for immediate liquidity .
- Utility, rent, and internet support: Electricity discounts (15%–50%), rent exemptions on government premises, free internet access, and subsidies for e-hailing/taxi drivers (one-time RM500 assistance).

2. PENJANA (Short-Term National Economic Recovery Plan) – June 2020

This RM35 billion plan focused on job creation and economic rejuvenation:

- Extended wage subsidies and a Hiring Incentive Scheme (PENJANA Kerjaya) offering RM800/month for under-40s and RM1,000 for older workers or persons with disabilities, for six months .
- Support for gig and informal workers, including matching grants for EPF and SOCSO contributions, and funding for training and e-wallet crediting.
- Sectoral relief: Tax reductions, e-commerce incentives (Shop Malaysia Online), microcredit through TEKUN/SME Bank, tourism grants, childcare support, property and vehicle tax exemptions, and promotional e-vouchers for online services.

ii.) Targeted Infrastructure, Digital, and SME Support

Beyond direct income assistance, the government rolled out significant investment-oriented stimulus under PENJANA and related measures:

- Digital infrastructure and automation: Substantial funding for broadband expansion and digitalization of SMEs; loans up to RM3 million at favorable terms, listing fee waivers for small companies, and grants for automation and digital adoption.

iii.) Micro-Entrepreneur and SME Support

Through the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives, a dedicated RM200 million stimulus targeting micro-entrepreneurs was launched under the CBRM scheme. It provided up to RM10,000 in grant assistance-designed with a three-year repayment horizon and a six-month grace period, extended even to blacklisted entrepreneurs on a case-by-case basis.

iv.) State-Level Measures: Sarawak's Example

States implemented tailored relief packages; Sarawak's "Sarawakku Sayang" initiative included:

- Electricity and water discounts, rent waivers for traders, and subsidies for low-income families (RM250 per month for six months).
- Three successive packages totaling over RM1.4 billion, including soft loans, trader grants (e.g., RM1,500 for hawkers), one-off RM500 payouts to single individuals, river taxi operators, taxi and van drivers, park and tour guides, and media personnel.

v.) Additional Support and Coordination Efforts

- Keluarga Malaysia initiatives: The "Skuad Keluarga Malaysia" coordinated inter-agency aid delivery via welfare agencies and NGOs. Meanwhile, "Yayasan Keluarga Malaysia" (launched October 2021) offered educational support to children affected by the pandemic.
- NGO involvement: Organizations like MERCY Malaysia raised RM14 million to support marginalized groups and coordinate with the Ministry of Health and NADMA on holistic pandemic response.

vi.) Later Packages: PEMERKASA and PEMULIH

In 2021, further stimulus measures extended support in response to renewed restrictions:

- PEMERKASA Plus (mid-2021): Included direct fiscal injections, healthcare capacity enhancements (e.g., ICU beds, PPE), extended contracts for healthcare staff, wage subsidies, rental and utility discounts, transport operator rehabilitation aid, and automatic loan moratoriums for affected segments .
- PEMULIH (Recovery Package): A RM150 billion ensemble of aid including:
 - One-time and phased cash transfers under BPR (Bantuan Prihatin Rakyat).
 - Loan moratoriums for all individuals for six months.
 - New allowances for the unemployed (RM500) based on EPF/PERKESO data, allocation for informal workers and fresh graduates via MYFutureJobs (RM300), estimated to cover over 1 million individuals.
 - Subsidies for e-hailing to vaccination centres, fuel price controls, and food aid through MPs' allocations .
- According to the ADB COVID-19 policy database, PEMULIH included the BKC grant (MYR4.6 billion), expanded electricity discounts, enhanced job-seeking allowance via MYFutureJobs, and over MYR500 million in additional EPF funding to assist more than a million Malaysians.

Interpretation and Critique

Malaysia's multi-layered policy response demonstrated both breadth and responsiveness. The early focus on liquidity via wage subsidies, EPF withdrawals, and utility discounts helped cushion immediate economic dislocation. Support for SMEs, gig workers, and micro-entrepreneurs reflected an awareness of informal sector vulnerabilities. State-level packages (e.g., Sarawak) and coordinated agency efforts expanded reach.

However, these responses also revealed limitations:

- Fragmentation and uneven targeting: Divergent programmes across federal, state, and NGO channels risked overlap or exclusion.
- Administrative complexity: Application barriers e.g., eligibility proofs, digital access demands may have limited participation, particularly among marginalised groups.
- Temporary relief: Many supports were short-term; long-term resilience-building (e.g., skills upgrading, broader social protection systems) remained underemphasised.

In sum, Malaysia's array of COVID-19 unemployment interventions spanning direct income support, subsidies, capacity-building, and infrastructure investments reflected an adaptive policy approach tailored to evolving shocks. While effective in averting social collapse, future policy design must integrate improved coordination, sustained support mechanisms, and structural transformation.

D. Effectiveness and Limitations

i.) Achievements

- Wage subsidies prevented a sharper spike in unemployment in the formal sector (Perkeso, 2020).
- Loan moratoria and EPF withdrawals preserved household liquidity.
- Cash transfers mitigated poverty rates despite GDP contraction.

ii.) Limitations

- Coverage gaps: Informal and gig workers largely excluded from wage subsidies.
- Digital barriers: Online application requirements excluded digitally illiterate households.
- Long-term risks: EPF withdrawals reduced retirement savings by an estimated RM145 billion collectively (EPF, 2022).
- Structural inertia: Wage subsidies sometimes delayed necessary sectoral restructuring.

E. Policy Recommendations

1. Expand Social Protection to Informal Workers
 - Develop contributory schemes decoupled from formal employment, with portable benefits and simplified enrolment.
2. Integrate Labour-Market Data Systems
 - Link EPF, PERKESO, tax, and welfare databases for faster targeting.
3. Invest in Active Labour-Market Policies (ALMPs)
 - Align training subsidies with growth sectors (digital, green economy, healthcare).
4. Address Digital Exclusion
 - Provide offline application channels and community-based outreach during crises.
5. Integrate Mental-Health Services
 - Embed psychosocial support into unemployment assistance.
6. Develop Transparent Fiscal Exit Plans
 - Gradually phase out emergency subsidies, redirecting funds to resilience-building measures.

F. Conclusion

Malaysia's unemployment crisis during COVID-19 was not simply an economic problem, it was a **wicked problem** shaped by systemic vulnerabilities, governance fragmentation, and social inequities. While stimulus packages blunted the immediate shock, they did not fully address underlying labour-market fragilities. Moving forward, Malaysia requires an adaptive policy framework that integrates short-term stabilisation with long-term resilience, ensuring inclusivity for all worker categories and preparedness for future shocks.

2.0. Design Thinking

Design thinking also allows leaders in current leadership to promote innovation among the global workforce, to develop productive problem solving systems and strategic decisions based on awareness and perceptions about user perceptions, which creates a cumulative trust and involvement throughout the organisation. So what is Design Thinking? Design thinking is a human-centred solution-based approach to problem-solving that focuses on gaining insight into user needs, reframing problems, and conceptualising using iterative prototyping and testing. Brown (2009) describes it as a mixture of empathy, creativity, and rationality in order to address both the desires of the users and technological possibility. This is commonly used in any field, including product development, organisational leadership, as it promotes teamwork and trying new things (Dam & Siang, 2021). Instead of moving with

desperation to solutions, design thinking considers involving, observing and putting empathy to the respective parties to unearth information and consider ideation, prototyping and improvement of solutions based on the feedback giving way to more effective and user centered solutions.



(Sources: LinkedIn)

Design thinking is the cognitive and user-focused process that involves five steps which are iterative in nature. First, Empathise consists of entangling with the users so as to gain insight as regards the needs and problems of the users. Then in Define, all of these insights are synthesized into a sense of what the problem is that leads to the whole process. Ideate promotes brainstorming and other ideas that lead to many creative solutions. The goal in the Prototype workflow is to construct low-cost models to visualise and experiment with ideas. Lastly, Test obtains feedback in the real world in order to refine or reconsider answers. Such phases create innovation and flexibility in world leaders and as such, design thinking is quite effective in addressing complex scenarios in business, education, welfare, infrastructure, among other political strengths. (Interaction Design Foundation,2023).

Over the past few days, the Global team leads utilize design thinking where they create empathy among culturally diverse stakeholders through multiple intensive workshops and cross-border research and hence allow profound contextual insight and common framing of the problem (HPI D-School, 2023). They selectively involve multidisciplinary partnerships, and include many different professional opinions in the processes of ideation and prototyping, which raises the level of innovation and cohesion (MDPI, 2023). (NumberAnalytics, 2024). This brings out effective decision-making, capacity to stay flexible to different local dynamics, ownership of solutions within geographically disbanded teams.lo

Why is “Design thinking” critical in leadership? This is partly due to the fact that the approach helps leaders tap into creative intelligence and reframe multifaceted problems and drive innovation by embracing compassionate, user-driven approaches (Spotless, 2025). It also encourages teamwork which involves solutions to problems using the perspective of different people in a better manner (Eduk8u, 2024). Also, the design thinking approach can assist executives in adopting the aspects of being willing to accept more than one meaning as well as being flexible in relation to the environment change, and looping a prototyping and feedback (RMIT University, 2025).

Design thinking is proving popular with global institutions to solve very complex challenges that are only on a temporary basis. A case in point is the rapid prototypes of the testing and reporting tools designed by World Health Organization (WHO) in the scope of the COVID-19 crisis that helped reduce the workflow (where clinics are under-resourced) and iterated in response to the feedback received on the frontlines (World Health Organization, 2020). Besides that, The United Nations (UN) is adopting user-centered design through pilot initiatives like Justice by Design, public co-designing justice services to become more relevant to local people, components of which are empathy and prototyping to eliminate invisible obstacles (United Nations System Staff College, n.d.). In the meantime, the World Trade Organization (WTO) is involving the stakeholders in periodic workshops to quicken trade rules creation during crises with the application of empathy and cooperative thinking to create flexible and inclusive trade agreements (World Trade Organization, 2021).

Contemplation on Malaysia’s COVID-19 (Wicked Problems):

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an example of such wicked problems in Malaysia consisting of complexity, uncertainty, and interdependent social, economic, and political issues. Malaysia had a Prime minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, came to power on March 1, 2020, after a political crisis which resulted in the downfall of Pakatan Harapan government. The Perikatan Nasional-led by Muhyiddin defaulted more to main sub-leaders in major sectors: Health Minister Dr. Adham Baba took charge of the health measures against the pandemic, Senior Minister of Security Ismail Sabri Yaakob coordinated the movement control orders (MCOs) and Finance Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz negotiated stimulus packages. A scan of the timeline of the response to the current situation in Malaysia via the prism of dancing through the design thinking empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test shows a combination of adaptive and reactive leadership steps. First, Malaysia in March 18, 2020, issued a stringent MCO, which exemplifies the phase of empathize and define because they measured the progress of the virus and made containment one of the priorities (Baltzersen, 2022). The quick shutdown of the boundary and non-essential services by the government

portrayed an awareness of the people's fear and health dangers. Solutions such as the Prihatin Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package (April 2020) were unveiled in the first stage, known as the ideate phase, to mitigate economic blowback and the Health Ministry launched test and contact-tracing apps such as MySejahtera. Testing and practice was carried out by means of phase MCO relaxations (e.g., Conditional MCO in May 2020) to facilitate the economy returning to action and infection control.

Yet the endeavors were escalated by political instability and mistrust among the population since policy alternation cost confidence. This theory of transformational leadership that is concerned with inspiring and moving the followers in a common vision fits the approach of Muhyiddin (Bass, 1990). Through his numerous televised speeches, he sought to bring the values of unity as a nation under a common purpose of the Kita Jaga Kita (We Care About One Another) campaign to have a sense of collective responsibility. However, the absence of continuous stakeholder involvement and transparency in decision-making process and especially the period of Emergency Ordinance between January and August 2021 curtailed the transformational outcome, as mass obedience reduced due to political scandals.

The analysis of the design thinking model as applied in the Malaysian COVID-19 response demonstrates diverse results related to political, economic, social and technological areas, and the algorithms-based tools are also a powerful instrument in this context. From a **political perspective**, the fact that Muhyiddin became a leader without an election created problems in his management as this made its opposition more critical and able to gain political momentum among the population, weakening the empathize phase of design thinking. The Emergency Ordinance that aimed to stabilize the rule was seen as an attempt to gain more power, and less trust was gained (Wong, 2021). At the **economical** aspect, stimulus packages such as Prihatin (RM250 billion) and PEMERKASA helped businesses and low-income households, in accordance with the ideate and prototype stages. Nonetheless, the perceived inadequacy in the distribution of aid and the lack of assistance to informal workers revealed points of failure in implementation (The World Bank, 2021). **Social** wise, MCOs and MySejahtera app promoted behaviors of working together, but the long-term social distancing started to erode mental health or social disparity among communities, especially low-income earners who reflected poor empathic views towards vulnerable others (Moreno et al., 2020). MySejahtera contact-tracing algorithm was successful on a **technology** level, which allowed quickly identifying cases (4,000 tests per million people by the middle of 2020), yet it was ineffective due to privacy-related limitations (Moon, 2020) and inequalities when it comes to digital access (Moon, 2020). Examples of benefits of algorithm-based leadership were better decision-making based on data, with the

fact that the analytics that MySejahtera provided can be used to implement targeted lockdowns, and scalability, regarding the fast nature of changes in policy. The disadvantages were the overdependence on technology that isolated the rural communities since most of them had less access to digital services and the prevalence of certain biases in the algorithms that did not consider the socioeconomic inequalities. The leadership in Muhyiddin may be innovative in the application of technology, but it faced some difficulties in the iterating test with political pressures as it is a shift in the theory of design thinking with its cyclical nature.

3.0. Emotional Intelligence in Conflict Management : Insights from Global Leadership during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has made some new unusual challenges to global labor markets, particularly in Malaysia, where the fast spread of the virus interrupted workplaces companies and increased tensions related to health safety, employment security, and social economic inequalities. In managing these conflicts, emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as an important skill for leaders and workers . Emotional intelligence is the capacity to understand, manage, and control emotions in oneself and others which it has been linked with more effective conflict management, especially under the high stress and the doubt that caused by the pandemic (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 2016; Goleman, 2020). In Malaysia's complex labor ecosystem, marked by cultural diversity and varying degrees of formality in employment, the application of EI has been important in navigating conflicts that arise from workplace safety protocols, job insecurity, and socio-economic tensions intensified by COVID-19 (Tan et al., 2021).

The start and arrival of the pandemic causing an immediate need for strict health and safety protocols in Malaysian workplaces, including social distancing, mask mandates, and staggered shifts, as guided by the World Health Organization (WHO) and local health authorities (WHO, 2020; Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2020). By implementing these protocols exposed significant conflicts between management and employees, often centered on concerns over job security, workload, and personal safety. Managers possessing higher levels of emotional intelligence were better equipped to settle these disputes by recognizing employee anxieties and addressing them empathetically. This empathetic engagement reduced resistance to health measures and fostered cooperation, demonstrating EI's role in mitigating workplace conflicts in crisis contexts (Ismail & Abdullah, 2021). For example, emotionally intelligent leadership involved transparent communication about the reason and

logic behind SOPs, acknowledging fears of infection, and providing psychological support, which were important in cultivating trust and compliance (Rahim et al., 2021).

Besides that, Malaysia's multicultural labor force which includes a significant proportion of migrant workers, added layers of complexity to conflict management during the pandemic (ILO, 2021). Different cultural backgrounds influence emotional expression and interpretation, which can lead to misunderstandings, especially when high stress and uncertainty risks prevail (Chua & Lim, 2020). Leaders with strong emotional intelligence and cultural competence navigated these cross-cultural dynamics effectively, employing social awareness and relationship management to improve inclusivity and reduce tensions (Ang et al., 2022). Foreign workers that are from other countries often excluded from formal social security schemes, face additional vulnerabilities, leading to conflicts related to unfair access to health benefits and financial aid (ILO, 2021). Emotional intelligence allows stakeholders to approach these ethical dilemmas with sensitivity, balancing organizational demands and humanitarian concerns.

The decision to move to remote work (work from home) during Malaysia pandemic lockdown periods presented new challenges for conflict management rooted in the limitations of virtual communication. The absence of physical cues such as facial expressions and body language complicated emotional perception and increased the risk of miscommunication and interpersonal tensions (Lim & Lee, 2021). In this context, emotional intelligence became even more important, encouraging leaders and colleagues to engage in active listening, explicit emotional sharing, and patience to mitigate conflicts borne from isolation and ambiguity (Tan et al., 2022). Research shows that organizations that promoted emotional intelligence training during this transition observed higher team cohesion and reduced workplace conflict despite the physical separation (Rahman & Yusof, 2023). This highlights the adaptability of Emotional intelligence skills in managing evolving conflict landscapes during pandemic crises.

Emotional intelligence (EI) also confirmed the need in addressing conflicts arising from economic insecurities caused by the Covid 19 pandemic, including layoffs, salary cuts, and underemployment. Malaysia experienced a sharp rise in unemployment rates in 2020, unequally affecting casual and non regular employees (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). Emotional intelligence facilitated compassionate leadership approaches that acknowledged the psychological distress of affected workers and helped manage tensions that might have escalated into industrial disputes or social unrest (Rahim et al., 2021). Leaders demonstrated EI by fostering open dialogues about organizational constraints, exploring alternative solutions such as reskilling and job matching programs, and

maintaining hope for recovery. This approach aligns with the principles of ethical leadership, which emphasize fairness, transparency, and care during times of crisis (Wong & Lim, 2020).

In managing conflicts tied to government policy and labor regulations during COVID-19, emotional intelligence was important for stakeholders involved in implementing and adapting Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Malaysia's government partners with international bodies such as the WHO to formulate SOPs that safeguard workers' health while sustaining economic activity (WHO, 2020). These SOPs often required negotiation with labor unions, employers, and informal sector representatives to resolve conflicts over feasibility and enforcement. EI facilitated these negotiations by promoting empathy, emotional self-regulation, and collaborative problem-solving, allowing diverse stakeholders to find common ground amid competing interests (Ismail & Abdullah, 2021). Furthermore, emotional intelligence helped calm politicization and public distrust, which threatened the effective implementation of pandemic measures (Tan et al., 2021).

Malaysia's governance response to COVID-19 labor challenges closely followed the growth of World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines on workplace safety and pandemic control. The government quickly adapted SOPs to meet WHO's recommended health measures such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, sanitization, and staggered work shifts, especially targeting high-risk industries like manufacturing, construction, and services (Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia, 2021; WHO, 2021). This alignment with WHO policies allowed Malaysia to participate in a coordinated global response while addressing local economic realities. The government worked collaboratively with workers, unions, and industry representatives to make sure these SOPs were practical and sensible within the diverse Malaysian labor market, balancing public health needs with the importance to maintain economic activity (Hashim et al., 2022) but applying WHO-guided SOPs across Malaysia's diverse labor market was not without conflict. Issues in implementation of standardized practices were observed in informal and migrant labor sectors, where regulatory restriction blunder and language issues aggravated compliance issues (International Labour Organization, 2022). Governance mechanisms had to combine flexibility and cultural competence, supported by emotional intelligence among policymakers and enforcement officers, to mediate resistance and mistrust. As an illustration of this, community mobilization initiatives and bilingual/multilingual communicative approaches were placed to enhance awareness and compliance. This responsiveness underscores how Malaysia's governance combined global policy frameworks with local emotional and social realities to manage conflicts and ensure occupational health and safety during the pandemic.

The psychological toll of the pandemic on workers also underscored the importance of emotional intelligence in conflict management. High levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout created fertile ground for interpersonal conflicts and decreased productivity (Chong et al., 2021). Emotional intelligence allows leaders to point out early signs of emotional distress and intervene appropriately through counseling, peer support programs, and flexible work arrangements. Empirical studies suggest that emotional intelligence training improves workers' resilience, reduces workplace conflict, and supports mental health, especially during ongoing crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Rahman & Yusof, 2023). In Malaysia, various organizations integrated Emotional intelligence frameworks into employee assistance programs to label the emotional challenges of the pandemic, improving healthier work environments and minimizing conflict escalation (Tan et al., 2022).

Beyond immediate workplace conflicts, emotional intelligence contributed to broader social conflict management during the pandemic. Issues such as stigma towards infected workers, discrimination against migrant laborers, and disputes over access to public health resources emerged as significant societal challenges (ILO, 2021). Emotional intelligence promoted social empathy and ethical reflection among policymakers and employers, facilitating more inclusive responses that considered vulnerable groups' needs. For example, transparent communication and community engagement initiatives reduced misinformation and fear, which otherwise could have exacerbated social conflicts (Chong et al., 2021). This demonstrates EI's potential not only in micro-level workplace conflict management but also in macro-level social cohesion during health crises.

While emotional intelligence has proven invaluable, challenges remain in institutionalizing EI practices within Malaysia's labor governance frameworks. The fragmented nature of labor policies, digital access disparities, and insufficient integration of mental health considerations limit the widespread adoption of EI-based conflict management approaches (Tan et al., 2021). Additionally, the exclusion of informal and migrant workers from many formal support systems reflects ethical shortcomings that emotional intelligence alone cannot address without structural reforms (ILO, 2021). Thus, improving emotional intelligence capabilities must be complemented by policy innovations, cross-sector collaboration, and inclusive governance to build resilient labor systems capable of withstanding future crises.

In conclusion, emotional intelligence has played an important role in conflict management within Malaysia's labor sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. By allowing empathetic communication, cultural sensitivity, and ethical leadership, EI has helped navigate complex conflicts arising from health risks, economic insecurities, and social inequalities. The importance of it has been underscored by the diverse and multicultural nature of Malaysia's

workforce and the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. In order to maximize the benefits of emotional intelligence, stakeholders must invest in training, integrate EI frameworks into policy and organizational practices, and address structural barriers that limit inclusion and equity. As Malaysia continues its recovery and prepares for future global health emergencies, emotional intelligence remains an indispensable tool for managing labor conflicts effectively and humanely.

Abstract

Interdisciplinary thinking in global leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with the widespread unemployment and underemployment in Malaysia, as well as the government's response through programs like PRIHATIN, PENJANA, PERMAI, and PEMULIH, to address various public health concerns.

Ethics in Global Leadership.

The ethical aspects of international leadership are examined in terms of issues such as fairness, inclusion of both informal and migrant workers, intertemporal justice in relation to EPF withdrawals, privacy concerns with the MySejahtera app, transparency, and the politicization that occurs during power transitions between prime ministers.

Furthermore, it presents particular ethical guidelines.

4.0. Interdisciplinary thinking in global leadership is reflected in the Malaysian COVID-19 syllabus. Labour Response).

Modern global leadership challenges are often described as such.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, which caused "wicked" problems that span across different sectors, involve conflicting values from various stakeholders, and cannot be resolved by a single area of expertise (Rittel & Webber, 1973), is evident. Although it started as a public health issue, the crisis quickly became an economic, social, and governance problem, with coordination across various sectors, including health, finance, labor, welfare, and digital governance. Leadership in such situations requires the application of interdisciplinary thinking, which involves combining technical expertise (epidemiology and macroeconomics), practical implementation skills (such as public administration and delivery of social protection), and human-centered decision-making (including psychology and communication) to create comprehensive policy solutions (Klein, 2021; Ben-Haim, 2020). However, The first phase of the crisis in Malaysia (March-May 2020) showcased an interdisciplinary policy response that was managed by various ministries and agencies within the prime minister's office.

A package of economic stimulus, titled PRIHATIN Rakyat, was declared on the 27th. Health spending, wage subsidies and cash transfers are among the measures implemented in March 2020 to maintain economic demand by providing income protection and a temporary EPF/kwsp withdrawal measures programme. This was a prime example of an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on health policy, fiscal policy and social protection as well as labor regulations. SOCSO/PERKESO was used to distribute payments under the Wage Subsidy Programme (WSP), which was designed for formal employees earning up to RM4,000. In the meantime, the EPF facilitation program (i-Lestari, later i-Sinar) provided households with liquidity from their retirement accounts. The emergency health allocations covered testing and frontline staff. This merged strategy was designed to deal with various components of the crisis at once. Ministry of Finance Malaysia. (i-Sinar / i-Lestari).

Interdisciplinarity played a crucial role in the rise of unemployment in May 2020, which hit soaring levels of 5.3% (around 826.100 people) as largely due to the economic effects of repressed health conditions and job losses concentrated in sectors that required close involvement, such as tourism, hospitality, and retail. The task at hand was not only to preserve current employment by means of wage support programs but also to aid non-standard and informal workers who were excluded from contributory schemes, address psychosocial harms, and plan for workforce reallocation and reskilling as job demands changed (DOSM, 2020). To achieve this, it was necessary to use a data strategy that linked databases from various agencies such as the EPF and SOCSO, along with programs like cash aid for providing employees and hiring incentives through training.

Effective interdisciplinary work requires coordination mechanisms and institutional innovations.

Malaysia utilized various methods, including policy packages from the PMO and MOF, coordinated measures across government agencies through the LAKSANA unit, and labor and liquidity support from PERKESO (Central Bank of Malaysia) and KWSP. All these were implemented with assistance from different departments in Malaysia. The combination of hiring incentives from SOCSO and PERKESO with an online jobs portal and training initiatives by PENJANA and PenjanaKerjaya is indicative of a multidisciplinary initiative that linked incentives for employers with skills development and job matching services.

Interdisciplinary focus does not necessarily guarantee successful outcomes in a variety of fields.

The year 2020-21 presented two major challenges. First, operational disorganization is set in PRIHATIN, SME+, (PENJANA), Kita-Prihatin, PERMAI and PEMULIH each with different eligibility standards. The challenge faced by informal workers, migrants, and those without digital access was in accessing benefits from schemes that demanded formal social security or tax records such as PERKESO evicts. It resulted in increased exclusion and more

complex implementation, which slowed the delivery of assistance to those who needed it the most. Bringing together individuals from different disciplines is insufficient to address translation failures, as leaders must actively translate professional terminology into practical procedures.

The shift in policy from Muhyiddin to Ismail Sabri Yaakob as prime minister in August 2021 is a clear indication of the importance of leadership in interdisciplinary thinking. The strategy under Muhyiddin's leadership emphasized the importance of swift, extensive stability by utilizing initiatives like PRIHATIN, Permai, and PEMULIH. These measures incorporated both medical and financial aid to address immediate issues. PEMULIH was introduced on 28 June 2021. An RM150 billion package was announced to support health efforts, businesses, cash assistance, and specific programs for affected individuals. The package included no financial aid.

In August 2021, Ismail Sabri assumed the presidency, and policy focus moved from emergency stabilization to a more structured recovery and revival of the labor market. Several employment and job creation programs have been launched by the government for the years 2022-22. The budget comprises MySTEP, PenjanaKerjaya 2.0, and JaminKerja Keluarga Malaysia. This effort sought to create jobs for hundreds of thousands by offering specific incentives for employers seeking foreign workers, where possible, moving them to local areas. The modification demonstrated a pragmatic adjustment of policies, shifting from massive emergency aid to initiatives that combined incentives, training, and job matching, drawing on input from labor economics and public administration, as well as skills policy.

Case study addressing underemployment

In the COVID-19 pandemic, underemployment occurred where many graduates and part-time workers worked fewer hours than they normally would have during the period or in roles that fell outside their natural range but did not match their skills. This was tackled through an interdisciplinary approach. Short-term hiring incentives, such as Penjana Kerjaya and Penjana Kerjaya 2.0, to reintegrate the unemployed into paid positions. Short-term programs and cash transfers were implemented to help unemployed people find jobs. Additionally, MYFutureJobs and MySTEP are designed to connect job seekers with suitable opportunities by providing training and upskilling subsidies aimed at reducing skill gaps and preventing financial hardship while searching for employment. Progress was mixed, though, as the government said it expects to have seen some significant placements by the end of 2021. However, the quality and long-term sustainability of many of these jobs were still a matter of concern. The solution to underemployment in practice is evidently dependent on

incentives for job demand, training and skill-building measures, and job matching and placement as part of an interdisciplinary partnership.

Policy inadequacies and suggestions for interdisciplinary leadership. Establish interdependent data systems that link EPF/KWSP, PERKESO/SOCSO, LHDN, and welfare registries. As a starting point, this will ensure that the right benefits are given to those who need them, make it easier to check if someone qualifies for it, and allow for swift resource reallocation in case of future emergencies. Establish roles that are specifically tailored to converting sector-specific solutions into practical strategies. The trade-offs between different policies will be monitored by the policy integrators in their roles. Develop diverse delivery models to reach out to workers who are not formally registered or have inaccessible digital tools. The options for registering in the community, partnering with NGOs, or employing mobile cash counters are available. Moreover, incorporate evaluation and learning processes such as real-time dashboards and coordination methods like LAKSANA model to facilitate swift adjustments when policies are not performing as expected. By adopting these steps, interdisciplinary thinking becomes a tangible reality in policy work, not just an idea.

Ultimately, however, Malaysia's approach to the labor impact of the COVID-19 pandemic shows both the potential and the challenges of interdisciplinary leadership. Despite being developed with an interdisciplinary approach, the implementation of these overall strategies was hindered by issues such as inadequate policy translation, fragmented data systems, and political shifts. To ensure effective and unbiased responses in the future, it is necessary to enhance cross-agency data sharing, increase the capacity to implement policy ideas, and create inclusive channels to reach informal and non-formal workers.

Malaysia's COVID-19 is an example of Ethics in Global Leadership. Labour and Social-Policy Response

The importance of ethical leadership is heightened when decisions impact people's livelihoods, civil rights, and the allocation of scarce resources.

In the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak, officials had to make tough ethical choices about whom to financially aid, whether to accept pension rollovers, how to monitor public health, safeguard personal privacy, and support non-citizen employees. The pursuit of ethical global leadership requires open discourse, a manner that is proportionate, impartial and respectful of individual rights. Malaysia's pandemic experience is a source of valuable lessons and examples.

In Malaysia, major support packages like PRIHATIN, PENJANA, and PEMULIH offered wage subsidies in the form of cash transfers from other contributory institutions. Additionally,

many contributing bodies provided similar services such as EPF and SOCSO. This approach was effective from an administrative standpoint, but systematically excluded informal workers and a significant number of migrant workers who were not part of formal payroll systems. Informal and non-standard workers were frequently left behind due to the requirement for tax and social security records (PMC studies) in academic and policy analyses. There are two ethical issues involve, firstly unequal access led to the immediate suffering of some of the most vulnerable groups and second implementing formal registers strengthened existing structural barriers. To reduce exclusion, an ethical policy approach would have required the use of rapid self-declaration methods, followed by verification and outreach through NGOs.

Intertemporal justice and EPF withdrawals. To ease the impact of cash-flow difficulties, the government and KWSP permitted specific withdrawals from retirement savings, such as i-Lestari in 2020, followed by the more extensive i-Sinar arrangements. These measures gave vital financial support to many families, but they also sparked ethical concerns about fairness between generations as withdrawals can lower the retirement savings of future individuals. From an ethical standpoint, leaders must decide between meeting current needs and upholding the long-term agreement to provide pensions. The most ethical approach is to find a balance between short-term support and actions that ensure future retirement security, such as encouraging re-contributions, offering financial education, and providing access in a targeted way rather than universally. Malaysia's response focused on practical relief, but future guidelines could benefit from better protections to ensure long-term retirement stability.

Privacy and surveillance in MySejahtera.

Contact-tracing apps like MySejahtera have ethical complexities; they serve as valuable tools for public health but also gather personal health and location information. The government repeatedly stated that MySejahtera data was held under the Ministry of Health's control and protected as per the privacy policy and MOH statements, but public concerns continued, especially as discussions about commercial use, service contracts, and plans to hand over parts of the app to private companies arose. The key ethical requirement is transparency: clearly explain who controls the data, how it is used, the rules for keeping and deleting it, and the presence of independent audits. It is also important to follow data minimisation and purpose limitation principles. Malaysia's experience shows that even well-intentioned digital solutions can lose public trust if there is a lack of clarity about governance and data ownership.

Leadership, transparency, and politicization. Various government changes and emergency regulations, including the 2021 date. Emergency Ordinances, cabinet changes, and shifts in ministerial responsibilities had an impact on people's perception of the government's power. (Ciulla 2020) asserts that ethical leadership requires the implementation of temporary special measures, which must be backed by evidence and open to public scrutiny. Due to frequent political instability in Malaysia and conflicting stories about data usage and emergency powers, some groups lost trust, making it more difficult for the public to follow public health rules. Therefore, leaders must provide a clear explanation of the rationale behind using special powers, their duration, and the process of making decisions.

Providing public health benefits to migrants and non-citizens is an ethical obligation.

The pandemic in Malaysia during its early stages led to discussions about whether foreigners should pay for tests or be excluded from certain supports. Moral dilemmas and health risks were brought about by these debates. Evidence suggests that not excluding migrants made it more challenging to contain outbreaks and resulted in clusters in overcrowded conditions. It's important to provide equal access to testing, treatment, and vaccination, which is ethically just and in line with human rights and public health. Ethically and practically, there are advantages to policies that provide universal access to essential health services and standards for worker housing and enforcement.

Procedural fairness and oversight.

The selection of wages, EPF withdrawal management methods, and digital tool procurement decisions could have been made with more rigorous rules, including explicit criteria and collaboration with stakeholders such as unions, civil society groups, or migrant organizations, along with independent oversight through parliamentary reviews or external audits. This approach was not necessary. When prompt action is required, it is preferable to use an ethics-in-process approach, which involves making decisions quickly but maintaining records and establishing review stages rather than using vague emergency orders. Malaysia's subsequent parliamentary and PAC discussions on MySejahtera emphasize the importance of reviewing decisions made quickly through retrospective oversight.

Ethics-by-design for emergency measures.

Integrate ethical standards to create stimulus packages by establishing eligibility criteria for both formal and informal recipients, considering how different groups will be impacted, providing time-limited provisions for emergency powers, and clearly outlining plans for returning or refilling long-term funds such as the Employees' Provident Fund.

Transparent data management.

Information regarding the handling of data, storage time, and independent audit findings is made available on public health platforms like MySejahtera. Maintain a minimum level of data protection and establish who holds the ownership of the data government or third-party contractor. The maintenance of public trust and the encouragement of system usage are aided by these measures.

Inclusion processes.

Implement swift, community-oriented approaches to registering informal workers and migrants (via NGO partnerships and mobile registration units) with subsequent evaluations to prevent their exclusion during the initial phase of a crisis. Additionally, The evidence from Malaysia suggests that relying solely on formal registration systems can leave numerous vulnerable individuals without alternative options.

International Labour Organization.

Participatory emergency decision-making.

Despite urgent situations, establish brief feedback loops with civil society, employers and workers' representatives. Record all decisions publicly and arrange for periodic reviews, such as every 30 to 90 days. The likelihood of politicisation is reduced and legitimacy is gained.

Ethical review of technology procurement.

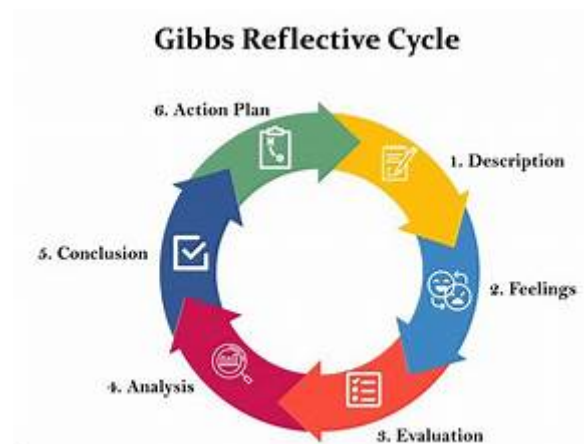
To ensure the protection of personal health data, public health systems should be subject to evaluations of data privacy and published agreements, as well as legislative oversight by external companies or commercial providers. The MySejahtera incident in Malaysia highlights the perils of ambiguous policies.

Summary

Life, employment, and freedoms are put at risk during times of crisis, which poses ethical challenges. The response to the pandemic in Malaysia had many ethically sound components, including large-scale humanitarian and health spending, but also had significant flaws, such as excluding informal and migrant laborers, unclear data management, and political tensions.

5.0. Individual Reflection - Gibbs

Our team collaborated on this assessment, using the **Gibbs Reflective Cycle** to individually reflect on the significance of global teams and also what we have learnt during session 2 class in effective problem-solving. The reflection process was guided by the cycle's six stages: Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, and Action Plan.



Gibbs Reflective Cycle	
Stages	Components
1. Description	Session 2 helped us explore the more complex global issues of climate change, inequality, technological disruption, and health crises and how each of those impacts leadership in global teams. It was pointed out during the discussion how interdisciplinary thinking and ethical leadership may be applied towards making effective decisions in a complex and interconnected environment. We also examined practical cases of wicked problems and collaborative ways used by leaders to tackle the problems.

2. Feelings	Our reaction at first was wondering and yet being overwhelmed by the fact that these issues are very wide and interconnected. In the course of the session, we had the desire to be more creative in our thinking concerning the solutions and the fact that leaders can combine the opinions of various disciplines and use them to address challenging issues guided accordingly.
3. Evaluation	We thought that collaborative discussions were very helpful, as they introduced me to positions that I would not have considered otherwise. Nevertheless, we discovered that we should work on faster self-action of theoretical frameworks into the real life situations to ensure my contributions will be more effective.
4. Analysis	The session awakened the fact that global leaders should learn to adapt to these climate changes by showing mutual empathy towards the new generation in order to respond to issues that transcend political, cultural and economic borders. In view of digital transformation 4.0, these skills are particularly crucial since the use of digital technology has changed the direction of traditional groupwork and problem-solving.
5. Conclusion	This session provided support to our understanding that global leadership in the contemporary world depends on synthesis of knowledge in multiple fields of study, diversity, and technology as the means to improve collaboration and innovation.
6. Action Plan	Our preparation in order to lead in the digital age of transformation especially to gain digital collaborative skills such as learning to use tools to work remotely, including Microsoft Teams, Excel, Beacon AI, and Social Media. Other than that, which is closely related to the first practice is by training cross-cultural communication online using Duolingo to enhance effective understanding between cultures from one and another. Finally, We would further keep on researching AI-shaped solutions to problems by coming up with more innovative methods in addressing global problems.

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