

elearning Experience in Malaysia

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Abstract

Although distance learning is not a new phenomenon in the country, e-learning was not an instant application of the internet. It came about only after the internet has been in use for almost two decades. Implementing e-learning was not as easy as it was thought to be. The conventional method of teaching was still preferred, even by those working adults who do not have the luxury of time to attend classes. However, it goes without saying that the technology has to be the state of the art, the effectiveness of the delivery system cannot be any less than the conventional teaching method and the flexibility of delivery must not be sacrificed. In short, the students expect the technology to be up to date and the effectiveness must be as good if not better than the conventional method.

The approach adopted from the outset was to assume that the system did not work at all. With that assumption, every effort was then made to ensure that everything works. In order to do this, firstly, we had to do continuous testing so that Murphy's Law can be prevented from occurring. Secondly, the system has to mimic the conventional system as closely as possible. At the same time, we have to be convinced that our assumptions about the preferences of students match very well with the model that we adopted. Thirdly, we also felt the need for additional support system that would enable the students to gain confidence when in trouble or receive the help at any time they need.

Based on the above three policies, we started to list the components of e-learning that would match with almost every aspect of the conventional learning. For instance, we know that in the conventional approach, there are lectures, tutorials, laboratory experiments, assignments, quizzes, examinations, etc. For each of these components we must create an e-learning component that will replace the component in the conventional approach.

Over and above those considerations, there are two additional conflicting objectives to be taken into account. These are the academic and commercial objectives. Both have to be considered in the right mix. Failure to balance these two objectives will certainly bring about myriad of other problems.

The questions to be asked now after UNITAR has been in operation for almost eight years are:

- 1.How successful is it in meeting the expectations of the students?*
- 2.What is the student profile?*
- 3.What have been the changes that had to be made in order to improve the performance of the university?*
- 4.What are the most important lessons to draw from this experience?*
- 5.How different would I do otherwise?*

Introduction

Distance learning is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia. It has been around for more than half a century. There were individuals who graduated from the

University of London via distance learning, without ever stepping their foot in London. City and Guild used to offer certificate and diploma courses in various technical subjects. Many of the graduates managed to improve themselves in their career path.

The first local university in Malaysia that conducted distance learning was University of Science, Malaysia (USM). It was started in 1970 known as the off-campus programme. Students have to spend a total of five years to graduate. The first four years would be spent outside the campus to complete the equivalent of two years study as full-time or in-campus students. The final year of the three year programme has to be completed on campus.

The off-campus programme of USM was very successful and hence was later followed by a few other institutions. Despite such experience, the advent of internet in early 1980's did not create any interest to conduct e-learning. The first e-learning initiative was conducted by University Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) in 1997/8, almost two decades after internet was operative in Malaysia.

Rationale for UNITAR to choose e-learning delivery mode

The main reasons why UNITAR chose to deliver education through e-learning were as follows:

- 1.It was thought that e-learning will not require any huge campus as is the case with all public and private universities that chose to conduct their courses in the conventional mode. As a private institution, this concept is a winner.
- 2.The financial capital required could be considerably reduced. Most of the capital outlay would be needed for laying the Information Technology infrastructure and equipment.
- 3.There is no restriction in the enrolment since students would be able to access

education from home, as long as they have computers with internet access.

- 4.Students would find it more convenient to study from the comfort of their own homes. The risk and hassle of travelling would be much reduced.
- 5.Recognising the importance of social interaction both with the staff and fellow students, UNITAR imposes some face-to-face meetings at various centres in the country. Students should choose a centre that is nearest to their own homes. These centres are collaborative partners of UNITAR, which makes business sense because UNITAR does not have to invest on such centres.

UNITAR e-learning model

Based on the above concept, UNITAR prepared the following items as the necessary components of its e-learning model:

- 1.UNITAR developed the CD-based teaching courseware that would replace lectures. Students access the subject matter on their own. This would save the lecturers' time and effort. Lecturer to student ratio could be reduced.
- 2.Face-to-face tutorials are conducted at learning centres by qualified tutors to enhance learning of the subject matter. For this purpose, learning centres are established at strategic towns, complete with classrooms, computer laboratories, resource centre, recreation facilities and other physical facilities for administrative and social interaction.
- 3.UNITAR initiated the development of a virtual library at the main Study Centre that could service the reference and reading needs of students from all over the country.
- 4.To facilitate e-learning as a whole, UNITAR developed its own Learning Management System (LMS) which is

called Virtual Online Instructional Support System (VOISS). VOISS contains various modules, such as the **schedule** (consisting of information on face-to-face tutorials, online tutorial, quizzes, examinations, etc.); **assignment** (which consists of schedules of assignments, assignment questions, etc.); **courses** (giving outline of courses registered, syllabus, name of lecturers, lesson plan, etc.); **FAQ**; **Examination** (schedule of exams, location, etc.); **Results** (Examination, quiz results and grades allocated for each course). The LMS is a very useful tool for students to check almost anything they want in order to follow the academic programme which they have registered for. If the LMS is down for some reason, the whole university is gone.

5. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has been established from day one to help students with their technical, academic and even social problems. The CRM operates on a 24x7 basis, with at least 12 hours being handled by the operators, and the remaining hours being recorded for escalation to the respective officers who would answer the queries within a stipulated time frame. This has been a useful device to mitigate customer frustrations, especially at the initial years of UNITAR's operations.
6. Finally, UNITAR also embarked on providing Online Tutorial (OLT) which provides real-time communication with students through voice over ISP technology. Both students and lecturers were very excited about it, but it became a nightmare after a few months.

The problems faced by UNITAR

UNITAR has probably established the best support system for the students who are IT savvy. However, within a short period of

operation, we have realised a number of problems that could have been avoided and some others may be reduced.

The first problem that was encountered was to achieve a reasonable balance between commercial and academic objectives. Whilst commercial objectives require high revenue through rapid increase in student numbers and reduced costs (by having a high lecturer to student ratio, less face-to-face meetings and more e-learning) the academic objectives may require just the opposite.

Secondly, the assumption that e-learning will quickly catch on was not true at all. The students who joined UNITAR, a private institution, are those who may not have a chance to join a public university whose fees are cheaper and whose facilities are much better. These are students who require more face-to-face teaching than independent learning through the internet. Even after almost eight years of operation, very few IT savvy students have enrolled.

It was also thought that working adults who intend to improve themselves through higher qualification would prefer not to attend classes. This seems true only among a small number of individuals. The majority still hopes to have the face-to-face interaction with the lecturers.

Thirdly, the so-called teaching CD's developed by UNITAR was not fully utilised by the students. Some lecturers would not even use them because they feel they could produce something better. Whilst the cost of producing such CD's is very high and that the time taken for development is too long, the effective use of them is very minimal.

Fourthly, most of lecturers themselves went through the conventional mode of education and hence are not very comfortable with the e-learning mode. Some of them would prefer to conduct the normal classes instead. If the lecturers are allowed a free hand, probably, they would abandon the OLT, the CD's, etc. and the e-learning will eventually be thrown out of the window.

Fifthly, the commercial objectives of trying to show positive results would hamper improvement in e-learning methodology, especially through research and training. Academic activities may have to be curtailed to show some success in commercial objectives.

Along the way, some improvements especially in the development of courseware had been successfully conducted. Instead of CD based courseware, UNITAR has moved into web-based courseware that had reduced the production time and more so the cost. The whole process had to be changed which is more heavily dependent on the lecturers.

The IT infrastructure too had been considerably improved, giving better service to the users. The OLT has undergone tremendous improvement after a new system is put in place.

How different would I do otherwise?

Having personally gone through the whole process, given a chance, I would certainly do it differently as follows:

Firstly, it is most important to train the lecturers not only in terms of how to effectively teach in an e-learning environment, but more importantly they should be immersed in the e-learning process and be a true believer of e-learning. This can only be done over time and not instantly as is normally done in the conventional university. It is possible to do it in the conventional university because they are familiar with the whole process, having gone through it themselves, all their lives. From my experience, it is easier to train those who are IT savvy than those who are not.

Secondly, sufficient time should be given to these lecturers to develop skills in developing the web-based materials. The advantages of developing web-based materials are faster and cheaper to develop and that they are easily replaceable or changed. Once these lecturers have such skills, it will be most practical for them to

develop the materials as they are also in charge of the courses they teach.

Thirdly, it is important that there exists well-tested administrative, finance and academic systems that are linked together for efficient administration. Students cannot accept an inefficient computerised system of administration in an e-learning environment.

Fourthly, I would suggest one should introduce higher degrees and short corporate training programmes first. The students would be more matured, appreciative of independent learning with less risk and hassle of travelling, especially after a long day's work. When the e-learning components are already well tested, then only one can slowly go into longer duration programmes.

Fifthly, when initiating an undergraduate programme like what UNITAR did, enough time should be given, especially during the first two years, for the students to build their confidence in a university education. They need to know what to expect through some experience. Only when they have the confidence, they will be able to experiment with independent learning. A blended or hybrid model where the first two years would have more conventional delivery mode is preferable. Thereafter, the e-learning delivery mode is gradually increased so that at the end of the programme, it will be almost 100 percent e-learning.

Sixthly, one should not experiment with education. One has to be very certain that the delivery system is effective before embarking on a big scale. Otherwise, the damage done will not be easily corrected.

Finally, sufficient studies about the market preferences must be conducted before implementation. This is a very useful bit of advice especially for those who go into education as a business.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would still recommend that some form of e-learning is introduced in any university setting. The advantages to the students will only emerge when they go into the real world. This is so because the rapid changes Information and Communications Technology (ICT) will bring into our life and systems will certainly demand familiarity and passion for ICT to be effective in the workplace. Hence, for education, the time will come when e-learning will dominate, although we cannot tell exactly when. As such, a blended or hybrid model is still the most preferred at the moment.
