

## LEARNING KITS AS ONLINE LEARNING GUIDELINES IN MASTER OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMME

**Mahani binti Abdul Malik**  
Open University Malaysia  
mahani\_abdulmalik@oum.edu.my

**Aliza Ali**  
Open University Malaysia  
aliza\_ali@oum.edu.my

### ABSTRACT

The master degree programme in early childhood education is a postgraduate degree programme in Open University Malaysia (OUM) designed for adult students wishing to further their studies in early childhood online. The learning kit was organised to become a guide and companion to students learning adventure in this programme. Thus this paper discusses the use of learning kit as online learning guideline for students enrolled in the Master of Early Childhood Education (MECHE) programme in OUM. This paper will also describe how learning kit can be used to assist online students in their studies for one semester. In this study, a total of 20 students from MECHE programme were selected purposively. Quantitative data was taken from questionnaires and qualitative data was taken through interviews and open ended questions. The data was analysed using the thematic analysis. The result showed that the students found the learning kit easily accessible and helpful in guiding them to study in this course.

**Keywords:** *Online Learning Materials, Guideline, Early Childhood Education*

### INTRODUCTION

There is a growing demand for access to higher education all over the world in this era, even in Malaysia. The government has reconstructed the higher education so that it can stay relevant and meet the competition of global market. In 2017, 1.325 million students registered for higher education, this does not include those returning back to colleges and universities for additional education and training (The Council of Industry and Higher Education, 2002). Lifelong learning is now a culture of the 21st century and this has brought in rapid development in three different areas which are access to education, lifelong learning and e learning. Technologies have changed how education are delivered on campus and at a distance. Learning are now becoming more flexible and accessible which would require a specially designed course material that needs to satisfy a large range of demands for learning, not to mention a big investment needed to create a variety of digital course materials (Little John & Shum, 2003). OUM, which was established in year 2001 to provide working adults with flexible learning opportunities, was also facing similar issues.

OUM practises the blended mode where learners are given self-learning materials, three to four times face to face classes, asynchronous and synchronous online chat and forums. Formerly all undergraduate learners in OUM were equipped with printed modules that were specially designed by subject matter experts in the field. Postgraduates learners on the other hand were given text books as references. Recently in its attempt to compete globally, attract new learners and reduce learners' attrition, Open University Malaysia introduced the html modules instead of the printed ones (Woo, 2011). She further explains that in conventional universities it is the academician who strives to enhance the university's

image through research and publications however in Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions such as OUM, it is the ability to produce good teaching and learning materials that are able to cater to diverse learning styles seems to be the main factor in enhancing the university's image. In an ODL environment the learners leverage on technology. Since learners in OUM are mainly working they are constantly on the move hence they need to be able to log in to their class anywhere and at any time. Mobile learning seems to be the university new direction. Physical books should no longer be the thing of the future, the university is looking at means of placing everything online even for the postgraduate programmes. E books, online journals and html modules seem to be the new approach the university is looking at for all post graduate programmes. When Open University Malaysia (OUM) decided to open its doors to students for the Master of Early Childhood Education (MECHE) programme, a decision was made by the faculty to innovate and do away with modules and reference books to save the university thousands of ringgits. As such, this research will study the usefulness of using learning kits as learning guidelines for MECHE programme.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The Faculty of Education and Languages, OUM was looking for learning materials for the programme of Master of Early Childhood Programme. Early Childhood Education reference books that were in the market were either too expensive or could not fully satisfy all course content. This problem is not only experienced in OUM as according to (Stern, 2017) many universities were dissatisfied with textbooks as it is rather difficult to get a book that is suitable to a particular course in its content, presentation, prescribed nature of learning element and yet be at a reasonable price. Some universities even created course packets composed of selected materials from various books while others simply create their own materials as supplements or to replace assigned textbooks. Commercial online textbooks on the other hand have other issues such as complicated log in and configuration requirements which requires instructor's validation or not designed for organization subsidization (Stern, 2017). As such the early childhood education team in Open University Malaysia was then entrusted by the faculty to produce learning kits to replace physical books or modules, the reason being high cost of reference books, difficulty in acquiring books that satisfy all course content and lastly postgraduate's learners should be equipped with the most current learning materials as such a learning kit would be the best solution.

This objective of this research is to study the effectiveness of the learning kit as an online learning guideline to the Master of Early Childhood Education students in Open University Malaysia.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Learning Kit as an Effective Tool**

The overall aim of this study is to enhance the learning experiences particularly for MECHE students through a comprehensive guideline refer to as the learning kit. The learning kit forms the basis of the MECHE programme. It guides learners in their study. The kit has become important sources of information in academic and has become the main ingredient that have become a necessity in the MECHE programme.

According to (Woo, 2011) in an ODL institution like OUM it is the quality of learning materials that actually provide learners with a meaningful and fulfilling learning experience as instructors are not physically near to fulfil each learners learning style. Guri Rosenblit (2009) explains attribution rate for distance education is high unless the university is able to provide an intensive support system. Although ODL practices flexibility it should be mainly for entry requirement, accumulation of credit, entry and re-entry, discipline focus or interdisciplinary curriculum and not on the requirement of the programme.

Guri Rosenblit (2009) further explains once learners are enrolled they should be subjected to stringent requirements of the programme and efforts should be made to ensure that there is uniformity and sameness in instructions, resources and assessment within and across centres. This was vital as MECHE is offered in all OUM learning centre across Malaysia. Hence it is important that learners understand what their learning outcomes are and what is actually expected of them. Since the focus is on learning outcomes then the instructional materials provided should take into account different student's learning abilities and learning styles. With that in mind the design of the learning kit was based on the Constructivist approach. According to Tactle and Cutielta (2002) the cognitive theory focuses on the learning process as new information is integrated with prior knowledge. As such the learning kit was designed to firstly spark previous knowledge then extend the knowledge with new information. Discussion are also inserted for scaffolding to occur and to make it relevant to the student classroom experience. Some previous successes with learning kits were the ones used in teaching ethical practices in counselor education (Granum, 1972) and content literacy skills in increasing teacher's interest in reading (Dugan, 2007).

MECHE being an outcome based programme the learning kit was specially designed to give learners a clear understanding of the course and what is expected of them. This was made possible with the following headings clearly explained in the kit:

1. Introduction to The Course
2. Course Learnings Outcomes and Course Learning Objectives
3. Contents Outline – Topic 1 to 10
4. Topic taught in 4 seminars
5. Specific Learning objectives and learning outcomes
6. Course assessment
7. Discussion
8. Group task
9. List of references

This gave the student a clear overview of the course and what is expected of them. This also allows the student the prerogative to study in accordance to their time. (Ng & Yang, 2017) in their study on perception of academics and learners on blended learning emphasised the importance of giving clear understanding of pedagogical goals as it would increase the quality of learning when technology is being used in learning. Even learning outcome was spelled out clearly for learners in every topic in the learning kit as this will help them assess themselves if they have achieved their learning outcomes once they have finished learning a particular topic.

As a post graduate programme it is also important that the faculty keep in mind the importance of not only producing autonomous learners but also learners who are able to collaborate and discuss intellectually. Most ODL institution focuses on producing self-directed and autonomous learners which actually contradicts how e learning should be implemented (Garrison, 1997; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Moving towards the 21century collaborative constructive approach should also be our main focus. This is important especially when learners are from diverse working background. The shared experience would definitely produce quality and knowledgeable graduates. As such the learning kit was designed not only as a tool to guide on what learners should learn and understand but it also contains prerequisite reading and questions for group discussion either online or in the F2F classes. This actually encourage the learners to do collaborative learning not only in the classroom but also online and when they convene to do group studies for those staying in close proximity.

There should be a high structured relation between the designer, tutor and student as this would make the material flexible and focused on personal needs of the student. If the learning materials are over structured, then it promotes passive learning and not active learning as what it should be.

### **The Use of myINSPIRE to Support the Learning Kit**

myINSPIRE is a learning platform that OUM learners used to access their learning materials, assessment, time table and other related services. A lot of thought was done on how to maximise the usage of the learning kit in myINSPIRE. The learning kit was placed as a whole document as a general guide and separated according to seminar for easy reference. For each seminar the learning kit was arranged according to topics to be covered in each seminar with a folder filled with resources such as PowerPoint, notes, videos, latest journals and research that learners would need to read and watch. This made the course very organised and structured for the learners to explore and study according to their time and leisure. The ECE team took pain in choosing a variety of mode of instruction to cater for different learning styles. This also made it easy for academicians to add and remove materials at every semester to keep reading current.

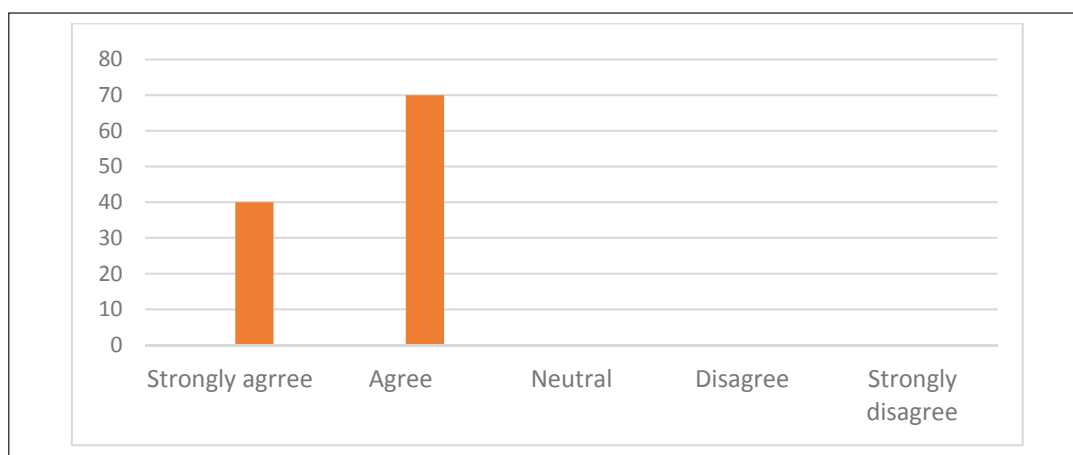
## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study uses quantitative and qualitative approach to collect data from MECHE students. A total of 20 students from MECHE programme from all over Malaysia were selected purposively. Quantitative data was taken through questionnaire and analysed using descriptive analysis. Whereas, qualitative data was taken through semi structured interview and open ended questions and was analysed using codes and the thematic analysis.

## **FINDINGS**

The Table 1 below shows the percentage of respondents who selected strongly agree and agree the learning kit is relevant to the course.

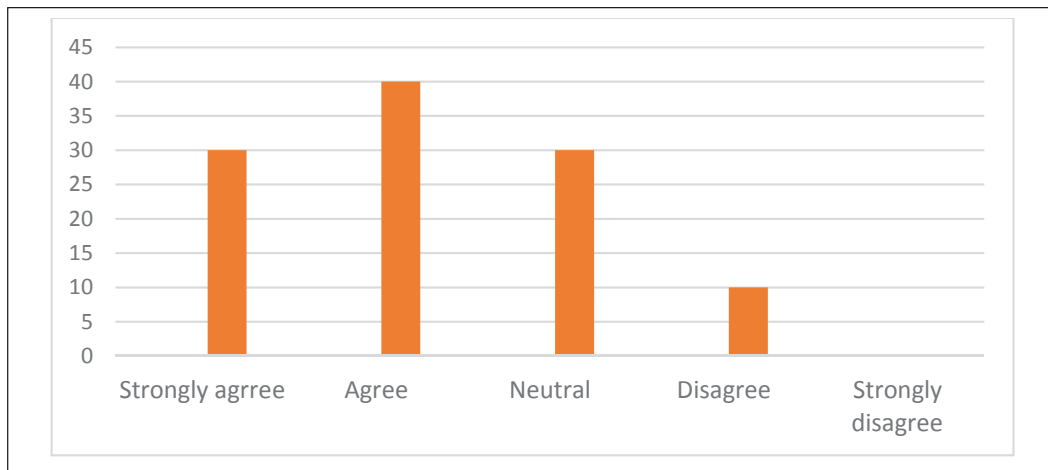
Table 1: Relevant to the Course



Analysis of the results shows that 40 percent of the respondents selected strongly agreed and 70 percent selected agreed that the learning kit is relevant to the topics in the course. None of the respondent selected neutral, disagree and strongly disagree.

The Table 2 below shows the percentage of respondents who selected strongly agree, agree, neutral and disagree that the learning kit is organized and easy to use.

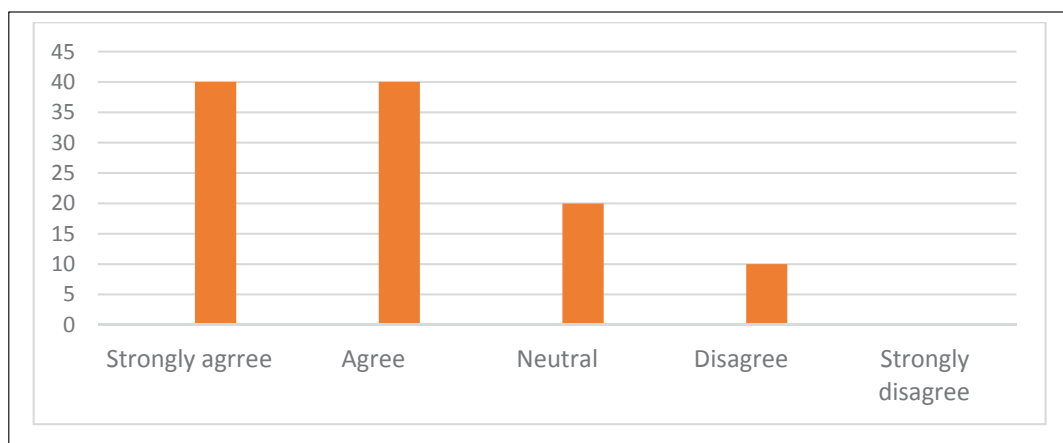
Table 2: Organize and Easy to Use



Analysis of the results shows that 30 percent of the respondents selected strongly agreed, 40 percent selected agreed. A total of 30 percent selected neutral and 10 percent selected disagree. None of the respondent selected strongly disagree that the learning kit is organized and easy to use.

The Table 3 below shows the percentage of respondents who selected strongly agree, agree, neutral and disagree that the learning kit should be continued.

Table 3: The Learning Kit Should be Continued



Analysis of the results shows that 40 percent of the respondents selected strongly agreed, 40 percent selected agreed. 20 percent selected neutral and 10 percent selected disagree that the learning kit should be continued. None of the respondent selected strongly disagree that the learning kit should be continued.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify specific themes related to the learning kit. Basically three themes emerged from qualitative data analysis collected through open ended questions and interview.

### **Theme 1: The Learning Kit is an Important Tool to Support Students' Learning**

There was an agreement among respondents that the learning kit is important to support students learning. They felt that the learning kit is an important tool to support students' learning throughout the course of the programme. They agreed that the learning kit do guide them on their leaning as well as provide all necessary list of learning materials related to their study.

The following are some response from the respondents:

Respondents 1:

*"Learning kit is very important especially for a person to do learning on own initiative."*

Respondent 2:

*"It guide me on what to study."*

### **Theme 2: The Contents of the Learning Kit is Very Informative**

Majority of the respondents agreed that the learning kit is simple and it give broad views of what to expect in the course. They agreed that the kit gives whole picture of the course by providing students with learning target and goals. There was an agreement among students that the learning kit describe learning outcomes that learners have to achieve by the end of the course. They found that the list of references in the learning kit is very useful.

The following are some response from the respondents:

Respondent 1:

*"I first get the whole idea of the course after seeing the learning kit. Then I start to plan my study based on the learning kit. Firstly, I will download or search all the materials given in the learning kit and arrange nicely in folder accordingly."*

Respondent 2:

*"All the materials given in the learning kit and arrange nicely in folder accordingly."*

Respondent 3:

*"I think one of the key things I find useful was the references part where you list down what books to refer to, what journals to refer to, what articles to refer to"*

### **Theme 3: The Learning Kit Provide Self-directed Learning for Distance Learning Students**

Finally, majority of the respondents mentioned that the learning kits provide self-directed learning for distance learning students to plan at their own time to complete the course. One of the respondents mentioned that the discussion questions in the learning kits are very helpful in preparing them for the examination.

The following are some response from the respondents:

Respondent 1:

*"I like the discussion questions in the learning kit. I will try to find answers for each of the questions. Indirectly, I don't only learn from the discussion questions but also help me in preparing for the exam."*

Respondent 2:

*"I first get the whole idea of the course after seeing the learning kit. Then I start to plan my study based on the learning kit."*

The following section reported some of the weakness in the learning kits.

1. Some of the list of references are not updated and available online
2. Some suggested link is not being discussed in class or used in the assignment
3. Some notes are not organized therefore create confusion
4. Only part of the course contents covered in the video lecture

In addition, here are few suggestions from respondents in this study for improving the learning kits.

1. More relevant and precise guide with useful information to the students
2. Include more information regarding assignment and rubric

## **DISCUSSION**

From the findings of the study, it would appear that the respondents in this study endorse the importance of learning kit as a guideline for their study. Majority of MECHE students agreed that the learning kit is relevant to the course and easy to use. Based on the finding, 70 percent has agreed that the learning kit is relevant to the course. They agreed that the learning kit has supported their learning throughout the course of the programme. However, the results of this study also revealed some weakness in the learning kits. Some references are not updated and not all journals listed are still assessable online or has password. Thus it is important for academicians to ensure all list of references are updated and all books are available in the library.

## **CONCLUSION**

The provision of learning kit as part of MECHE online guideline has provided unexpected support to learners learning in MECHE programme. Learning kit has become a main guideline for MECHE learners in terms of access to current and updated information for their academic endeavours. For this reason, it is important for the university to prioritize learning kit as an important tool for all post graduate learners to ensure learners will be provided with a comprehensive guideline and would be able to see a general overview of the course and are aware of learning outcomes that they have to achieve. A greater awareness of learning expectation provides a more meaningful learning experience and to better address the unique needs of postgraduate learners. Postgraduate learners come from a variety of career backgrounds. They place a great deal of importance on their educational experience, especially in regard to academic factors. This is likely to enhance lifelong learning and support retention and progression rate.

Clearly, the results of this study may provide useful information for postgraduate lecturers and course developers in shedding some light on how to make ODL learners more convenience in unfamiliar and complex ODL environments. There are potential benefits for higher education institutions to identify, understand and act upon, the particular requirements of postgraduate learners. Postgraduate courses must be specifically tailored to ensure learners are provided with relevant support, information, knowledge and skills from their educational experience to ensure career progression. Branch (2009) stated that instruction is appropriate only when the competency of the individual can be increased through improved knowledge or skills. In order to alleviate these challenges, maximum use of resources and guidelines should be put in place to make sure they are fully utilized and accessible by learners. Thus, further research to explore the specific needs of mature ODL postgraduate learners would provide greater insight into the needs of the programme and course contents.

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