

Strategies for Ensuring Quality in Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract

The quality of higher education provided by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions has been considered to be lower than that of conventional universities. This is possibly due to the “part time” nature of ODL, the modes of teaching and learning, as well as the image of open universities as giving a “second chance” education to working adults. However, Open University Malaysia (OUM) believes that this perception of lower quality can be addressed through proper deployment of key strategies. In the context of OUM, the strategies include (a) adequate preparation for prospective learners; (b) quality learning materials; (c) quality tutors; (d) quality assessment methods; (e) quality support services; (f) embracing appropriate technologies; and (g) capacity building. This paper will introduce OUM as a relatively young ODL institution and discuss in detail the said strategies. OUM believes that confronting this issue of quality is important to ensure that educational services and consequently, the graduates of ODL institutions are on par with traditional institutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the premier Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Malaysia. Established in August 2000 under a consortium of 11 of Malaysia's public universities, OUM opened its doors to just 753 learners in its first intake. In the past eight years, total learner enrolment has grown past the 67,000 mark. From offering a mere four programmes during its inception, OUM currently lists 51 programmes ranging from diploma to postgraduate levels. OUM operates nationally through 61 learning centres dispersed throughout the country; and internationally through three learning centres in the Kingdom of Bahrain, Indonesia and Yemen. OUM has produced 8,241 graduates as of December 2007 and the number is anticipated to grow in line with the University's aim to achieve the coveted "mega university" status by 2010.

In such a fast-paced and ever-evolving industry, OUM recognises that maintaining a solid competitive edge involves the ability to cater directly, flawlessly and carefully to its learner clientele. Quality is the cornerstone of its operations, and this entails providing the best in all aspects, from the moment learners are enrolled, throughout their student lives, including continuous institutional development strategies and keeping abreast of technological advancements. Quality in higher education and ODL has always had ambiguous and multifaceted connotations. Despite variations in defining quality in ODL, OUM strives to keep a holistic viewpoint in order to encompass all the perspectives in the provision of higher education. OUM and other ODL institutions globally will need to emphasise on this holistic approach to quality so as to ensure that ODL will remain on par with traditional, brick-and-mortar universities.

This paper will describe seven strategies identified by OUM for ensuring quality in its services. New learners must be given due preparation as many would not be familiar with the nature of ODL. As their studies progress, the institution must also look into the provision of quality learning materials; assessment questions and methods; and learner support services. Adopting appropriate technologies for the betterment of its services as well as investing in institutional capacity building efforts are also an important aspect in this effort towards quality.

II. QUALITY IN ODL: A BRIEF REVIEW

ODL was established in the wake of global educational reforms. Demand and access for tertiary education grew as many economies started to embrace information and communication technologies (ICTs) and a knowledge-based workforce began to make its mark in societies throughout the world. ODL provides that much needed provision to a university education. Many working adults who otherwise may not have had the chance to obtain a degree are now given the opportunity to upgrade their academic backgrounds whilst juggling professional, familial and social responsibilities. In this context, ODL is indeed a blessing to many. ODL was founded on the essence that education should be borderless, equitable and flexible. Interestingly however, the idea of an unrestricted education system is also seen as lacking in quality. The perception of ODL as offering a “second chance” university education to “part-time” learners and the unconventional pedagogies employed has prompted doubt in its quality.

It is perhaps important to note that quality in education and quality in ODL are separate entities altogether. This is possibly due to how ODL is generally deployed. The variations in its delivery; official regulation; national and regional educational frameworks; and issues in accreditation and approval collectively contribute to the different ideas of what quality in ODL should mean. Hence, quality in ODL is an entity with many features. That said however, despite quality’s multifaceted appearance, many would agree that it is imperative that ODL institutions address this perception of lack of quality accordingly. It has become a leitmotif for educational policies, a slogan for practitioners and a huge demand for learners (Ehlers and Pawlowski, 2006).

Quality in e-learning and ODL spans over the fields of education, technology and economy. Quality has also been identified as the most decisive factor in determining the future of e-learning (Ehlers and Pawlowski, 2006). It is amusing to note that this characteristic is both a reason for and an effect of the variety in concepts, suggestions and fundamental components advocated for quality in ODL. This concept of quality no longer holds just one definitive meaning; and in actual fact, is being seen as more subjective and individualised. Varying benchmarks, fundamental components and key factors have been identified by numerous individuals and organisations; encompassing institutional commitment through assessment (the US’ Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000) and even perfection, transformation and adequate returns to the institution (Harvey and Green, cited in Ehlers and Pawlowski, 2006).

Notwithstanding its varying interpretations, OUM looks at quality from a holistic perspective. As advocated by Ehlers and Pawlowski (2006), education is not a business that involves classic supplier-customer relationships but an association of co-producers instead. This is in line with the philosophy at OUM. ODL is a business without boundaries, and concomitantly, imparting and achieving the best in ODL require a collective effort from everyone. Quality at OUM is an attribute we aim to enculturate at every level and with every individual. Thus, in spite of a single definition, quality at OUM signifies providing the best in e-learning and ODL through all aspects of our services.

III. ENSURING QUALITY AT OUM

As mentioned earlier, this paper will describe seven strategies employed at OUM for the enculturation of quality. The seven strategies are: adequate preparation for new learners; quality learning materials; quality tutors; quality assessment methods; quality support services; embracing appropriate technologies; and capacity building.

3.1 Adequate Preparation for New Learners

OUM has operated on an internationally recognised blended learning pedagogy that incorporates face-to-face sessions, online learning and self-managed learning. This approach is designed to allow flexibility in the learning process and has proven to be quite successful for the University's learners, 95% of which are working adults. This blended pedagogy integrates all the necessary components for an ODL learner through the use of multimodal learning technologies that allow for synchronous and asynchronous learning, guided by real-time and virtual communication with tutors as well as independent learning aided by specially-constructed modules and other internally-designed multimedia tools.

More often than not, this pedagogical approach is a novel experience for newcomers to ODL. Those familiar with the full-time nature of traditional universities, as well as those who have been away from academia for some time, will more than likely find ODL awkward at the beginning. In order to alleviate the learners' initial anxiety, OUM offers an introductory course entitled "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners". This award-winning course is made compulsory to all new learners. It provides elementary information on how to learn in an ODL environment; introduces the basic ICT skills required; familiarises learners with the teaching and learning processes at OUM; and even trains new learners to search for information.

Another important component in introducing newcomers to ODL is the Learning Skills Workshop. This workshop is also made compulsory to all new learners and is designed to provide exposure to the ODL methods and environment. The theoretical and practical aspects of ODL, including skills, techniques and motivational elements, are presented in this workshop. Both these strategies hope to eliminate "culture shock" once learners officially and properly commence their studies at the University.

3.2 Quality Learning Materials

The cornerstone of OUM's learning materials are its print modules. Written by externally-appointed subject-matter-experts (SMEs), these modules are developed by OUM's academic personnel, instructional designers, multimedia programmers, graphic designers and other technical experts at the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CiDT). These modules undergo periodical reassessment with regards to content, language, clarity and other criteria. One of the upgrading strategies employed for

the print modules is a translation project with an international publishing house. Initiated in 2007, OUM's print modules previously written in *Bahasa Malaysia* are currently being translated into English, as OUM also prepares to conduct all of its programmes in English by January 2009. This translation project, scheduled for completion at the end of this year, will ensure that all 51 of OUM's programmes will be equipped with modules in the English language.

Albeit the print modules remain as OUM's core learning materials supplemented by other multimedia tools such as Coursewares, iTutorials and iWeblets, they are also being converted into electronic format via an e-content development initiative. With the recent purchase of licences from Raptivity™, OUM aims to convert all of its print modules into engaging, attractive and interactive e-content by 2008. Raptivity™, an abbreviated terminology referring to a "rapid interactivity builder", is a software for developing e-content in a shorter time and reduced cost. This software is the first of its kind and is aimed at aiding SMEs and content developers to specifically design learning materials for ODL learners. Thus, despite the proven quality of its print modules, OUM is always looking for ways to up the ante in terms of providing the best and most enriching learning experience to its learners. The University recognises that learning materials must also evolve with current technological trends in order to keep learning interesting and relevant to the demands of today.

3.3 Quality Tutors

Learning at OUM takes place in 61 learning centres nationwide. The University's academic staff are seldom in direct contact with the learners. The actual front-liners are tutors. Tutors act as the bridge between learners and the University and shoulder the most significant role of educating the learners. In order to ascertain a quality learning environment, it is thus an imperative that only the best and most qualified individuals are employed as OUM tutors. The recruitment process is stringent, where only those with the necessary academic background, knowledge and teaching skills are selected.

As soon as they are welcomed into the OUM family, these tutors are managed by the Centre for Tutor Management and Development (CTMD). Workshops, dialogues and training sessions are conducted every semester as a capacity building effort geared towards providing tutors with the chance to upgrade their skills and experiences, voice out concerns and speak on behalf of fellow tutors and learners as well. OUM houses over 7,000 tutors, with more than 3,000 active during every semester.

Throughout the duration of their employment, the CTMD also evaluates and monitors the tutors' performances. The tutors' online activities and interaction with learners are carefully observed in what could be considered a "quality assurance" measure.

3.4 Quality Assessment Questions

Examinations are an essential component of an educational experience. How learners respond to and what they achieve in examinations translate to what kind of graduates they make and reflects the quality of the institution from which they obtain their respective degrees.

OUM learners are evaluated based on continuous assessment (which includes assignments, tests and mid-term examinations) and final examinations. Examination questions and other assessment components are prepared and moderated by the University's SMEs and academic staff. These processes are regularly and periodically reviewed and we are also always looking for ways to improve.

The most recent development in this regard is the establishment of the University's question bank. The question bank project, initiated in early 2008, is OUM's initiative towards the preparation, collation and utilisation of quality assessment questions. Questions submitted by SMEs, academic staff and selected qualified tutors are carefully moderated, selected and archived through a designated software, which then automatically generates sets of examination questions based on set criteria and in accordance with the learning domains of Bloom's taxonomy. Anchored to this idea and together with the aid of technology, OUM hopes that the question bank will be able to generate random but non-repeating sets of questions for all 337 of the University's subjects for several years and increase the quality of its assessment methods and examination questions.

3.5 Quality Support Services

It is a well-known fact that ODL institutions find it harder to retain learners than conventional on-campus institutions. The part-time nature of ODL, coupled with the learners' multiple personal commitments, can bring dampen their spirits, make them feel isolated, lower motivation and potentially bring academic failure. It is the duty of the University to provide quality support services in order to retain the learners' enthusiasm and ascertain an enriching and engaging learning experience. Such services should help to guide learners to develop self-discipline and independence in learning.

OUM's Centre for Student Management (CSM) has the most significant role in providing learner support services. The CSM is responsible for managing learner retention programmes, conducting research and workshops as well as running alumni activities. Under its wing, the Counselling Unit imparts academic advice and individual and group counselling to learners in need. Similarly, the Learner Services Centre acts as the first touch-point for learners who have questions, complaints, suggestions received by telephone, fax and e-mail.

3.6 Embracing Appropriate Technology

ICTs are a significant accessory to ODL. As asserted earlier, the very idea of ODL hinges on the technological capacity to reach out to temporally and spatially distant learners. OUM considers adopting the appropriate ICTs as an important step in developing that technological capacity and subsequently, achieve quality in the provision of ODL.

In this regard, OUM is constantly trying to improve the ICT infrastructure within the University. This endeavour has been realised in the following areas:

- Enhancement and improvement of the University's learning management system (LMS), i.e. the myLMS;
- Migration of the University's e-mail to the Google-based GMail™ system;
- Deployment of the University's internet radio, i.e. iRadio OUM; and
- Embracing various other technologies.

The myLMS, an internally-developed system, is the most integral part of a learner's online existence. The myLMS is periodically and continuously upgraded in order to supply the learners with all the important information regarding their studies at OUM. It is through the myLMS that learners are connected to their peers and tutors; receive reminders and updates; can peruse their own personal records and details; as well as access course content and assignments. Coursewares and other multimedia content are also accessible via myLMS. Thus, it is an imperative that this system is made available at all times. A designated team at OUM is employed to ensure that the system is always up and running and that learners can alert the University if and when they encounter problems with the system.

Another technological strategy is OUM's recent migration to GMail™ as its main e-mail service provider. OUM made the decision to outsource its e-mail service as the University's family of staff, tutors and learners continues to grow in number. Despite having developed and employed its own e-mail system since 2002, one that is modelled after SquirrelMail, the migration to GMail™ is considered timely as a new, modernised, secure and feature-rich e-mail system is expected to be able to better sustain the ever-increasing needs of the University. OUM is in fact, the first university in Malaysia to use such a system. Internationally, the University of Texas San Antonio in the United States, Trinity College in Dublin and Nihon University in Tokyo rank among other higher education providers that have also subscribed to GMail™.

iRadio OUM is a new media approach for the deployment of information and learning materials to learners. Developed with the aim to present module-based programmes and to build a more personal rapport with OUM learners, iRadio OUM has been on the air for over a year and now broadcasts 36 hours a week. Transmitted over the World Wide Web, learners can download audio files and podcasts of broadcasted programmes to listen to at any time convenient to them. The University intends to continue promoting iRadio OUM as a vital component in the learners' ODL environment.

The University also plans to continue exploring other technologies to supplement and enhance its services, e.g.:

- Mobile learning – to reach learners at remote areas with limited internet access via mobile phones and other handheld devices;
- Multiple data centres – to ensure that data is well-managed and secure;
- At least two internet service providers – to ensure redundancy, continuous service and better coverage/access; and
- Clustering of servers – to better manage data and applications.

3.7 Capacity Building

The term “capacity building” first surfaced in 1991, and has been defined by the United Nations (UN) as a country’s “human, scientific, technological, organisational, institutional and resource capabilities”. The UN, through its Development Programme (UNDP) also recognises capacity building as a way to “enhance the ability to evaluate and address the crucial questions related to policy choices and modes of implementation” (UNCED, 1992). The World Customs Organization (WCO) has an alternative description of capacity building, which is “activities which strengthen the knowledge, abilities, skills and behaviour of individuals and improve institutional structures and processes such that the organisation can efficiently meet its mission and goals in a sustainable way” (the WCO Columbus Programme, 2005).

OUM considers capacity building as another important strategy in the drive towards quality. Capacity building efforts are put into practice at every level of the University, i.e.:

- Institution;
- Academic personnel and tutors;
- Administrators and support staff; and
- Learners.

Institutional level capacity building, with quality in mind, commands a holistic view of the University and involves leadership, infrastructure and human resource management. University personnel, from the top management to middle managers and younger support staff at the grassroot level, must be instilled with positive values. Principally, the leadership of the University has to believe in the institutional vision and mission; provide the necessary infrastructure for the realisation of the aforesaid values and strengthen its human resource with the necessary training and learning opportunities. Staff are encouraged to adopt higher order thinking and develop a customer- or learner-centred approach in their work. The academic staff and tutors are also encouraged to constantly improve and upgrade knowledge in their respective subject matters and acquire better communication skills in order to promote a conducive teaching and learning environment for themselves as well as the learners. Workshops, dialogues and meetings are periodically arranged throughout the year, where the staff and learners are given a chance to speak up and learn new skills.

Specifically tailored for the capacity building of learners, they are also given the opportunity for self-development through the various programmes conducted by the CSM. Areas that are focused on include the development of communication skills and “soft” skills (such as public-speaking and information-seeking) that are deemed useful in the workplace. The ultimate danger regarding quality in ODL is the production of “cookie-cutter” learners and graduates; and it is through capacity building that OUM is attempting to pacify that concern.

IV. CONCLUSION

The flexible, equitable and borderless access to higher education offered by ODL is seen as a boon as well as a bane. Critics may raise their brows at the seeming lack of quality due to the simple and uncomplicated nature of ODL. In the past seven years of operations, OUM sees this issue of quality as something to be addressed using different approaches at every level of its services. Thus, OUM aims to improve quality standards by adopting a holistic viewpoint and taking into account the experiences of ODL learners; constant enhancement of physical and technological infrastructures; the provision of qualified academic expertise and learner-centric services; the adoption of quality learning materials; as well as cultivating a culture for excellence and self-betterment through capacity building efforts across the institution.

Quality is a buzzword in today's higher education. Due to its relatively new entry into the scene, many may view ODL with apprehension, particularly as higher education continues to grow as a commodity; a market; a business in the global landscape. OUM is not of the opinion that ODL lacks quality. However, it is important to note that such apprehension is not without basis. Quality may be defined in different terms and achieved by different means. The provision of greater access to a university degree through ODL does not mean sacrificing quality along the way. Rather, this view has to be overturned by ascertaining that the services and operations of ODL institutions are up to par with those of traditional universities.

Aristotle once said: "*Quality is not an act, it is a habit*". This is the view that OUM would like to embrace and put forth. The institutional drive towards quality has to be seen in what the institution actually does on a day-to-day basis; at every level; by and for every individual involved. When all is said and done, quality in ODL is not only achievable, it is a *must* as learners and graduates continue to penetrate the global workforce.

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