

Keynote Speech 1

Higher Education in the 21st Century: Issues and Challenges¹

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Abstract

Higher education institutions today are surrounded by issues that have developed as a result of the transformation of societies from the industrial to the information age. Accompanying these are a set of challenges that colleges and universities have to overcome in order to survive or risk being obsolete. Institutions are expected to equip graduates with the right attitude, adequate knowledge and a set of relevant skills for the information age and who will be able to function well in the knowledge-based economy within the context of globalization and lifelong learning. The keynote address highlights three major sets of issues and challenges faced by academic leaders and administrators in the education industry as institutions move forward and strive to be self-sustaining institutions.

Introduction

First and foremost, I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to deliver a keynote address at the SEAAIR 2004 Conference with the theme "Entrepreneurial University of the 21st Century." Let me first begin by saying that the 21st Century, as we all know, has been characterized by phrases such as:

- Digital age
- Digital revolution
- Entrepreneurial university
- Globalization
- Knowledge-based economy
- Knowledge worker
- Knowledge society
- Paradigm shift

More can be added to the list but these few phrases have directly and indirectly affected our thinking and perceptions on higher education today. Simultaneously, arising from these phrases, countries are clamouring to change their landscape with regard to higher education. Some are reaping the benefits while others are less successful. It is however clear that in the **digital age** that we are in today, higher education has to respond to the changes or risk being obsolete. As we move towards a **knowledge-based economy** (K-based economy), higher education institutions are expected to respond in such a way as to produce the right type of graduates, namely the **knowledge**

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Under the traditional and conventional mode of thinking on higher education, its purpose is basically to **provide instruction**. However, a new paradigm has emerged under which the principal purpose of higher education is to **produce learning**. Moving from an environment that “provides instruction” to one that “produces learning” requires not only a paradigm shift but doing it in such a way that will provide an environment acceptable to students using effective pedagogies and utilizing the most up-to-date technologies where appropriate.

In other words, the challenge is to move from a teacher-centred curriculum to a learner-centred curriculum. We need to think of ways that will engage students in the learning process. However, it is quite evident that in the Asian educational environment, the curriculum is still largely teacher-centred. Teachers tend to regard themselves as “experts” and love being the main source of reference. Our Asian society is generally uncomfortable when students know more or have better ideas than the “teacher”. Changing the mindset of educators will take a significant amount of unlearning and relearning. It is indeed a challenge that many developing countries like Malaysia have to face.

There is also a need to design and offer various learning activities to cater to the different learning styles of students. There is a need to establish an interactive curriculum which is holistic and where pedagogies are effectively applied to inculcate a positive learning culture. Simultaneously it is imperative that we develop a mechanism to effectively assess the learning outcome both quantitatively and qualitatively. Should assessment methods then change? Typically, assessments in the form of tests have been largely based on recall and recognition with few applications and analysis type of questions.

In today’s education scene, building learning communities have been found to be valuable and relevant, especially within the context of the digital age where many adults are already connected to computers and the Internet. The latest Internet statistics reveal that 729.2 million people (Global Reach, 2004) are “netizens”. Hence, networking amongst learners through online discussion forums for collaborative e-learning has become very common in the more developed countries; and is getting popular in the Malaysian higher education institutions.

In fact, at Open University Malaysia (OUM), e-learning has become one of its three principal modes of learning and part of its blended pedagogy. Collaborative e-learning is an application of constructivist theories of learning that supports adult learning in many positive ways. Our efforts in establishing interactive learning networks will be a critical success factor in our move away from “providing instruction” to “producing learning.” We are confident to produce not only digitally literate graduates as a result of the process but also graduates who are adept at thinking, rationalizing, analysing and articulating ideas as a result of collaborative e-learning experiences.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Now move on to the second group of issues and challenges.

Group 2

Issue: Globalization and the Global University

Challenge: Establishing a quality Global University with an internationally relevant curriculum

workers so that they are able to fit and function in a **knowledge society**, thus providing the impetus for further growth and expansion of the country's economy. This is also critical from another perspective; namely the capacity of the country to expand its supply of knowledge workers who are adept at initiating innovations and technological breakthroughs, which will in the future be the most important catalyst for societal change.

The changes we have seen among universities in the last decade and in some cases, the last twenty years, is the requirement for public-funded universities to be cost conscious and to have to depend less and less on traditional sources of funds from the government. Instead, they have to seek new sources of funding and generate their own income. Universities have to be **entrepreneurial** to cope in the digital age and to manage the **digital revolution**, producing knowledge workers so that the country is able to make the transformation into a knowledge-based economy.

This requires a **paradigm shift** among policy-makers and educational leaders of today; and as we have seen, many universities have realized the need to meet the challenges of globalization by becoming a **global university**, that is, by going offshore to set up branch campuses or to at least establish twinning arrangements with colleges where students obtain credit transfers when they move from the college to a university of their choice. The advent of private universities, as witnessed in many countries, as a policy instrument, seems to strengthen the move towards this end. This is one of the entrepreneurial ways as part of the solution to solve the woes of university funding. At the same time, a global university also implies the need to "benchmark" against the best universities in the world. Apart from enhancing the existing undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, the academic staff would have little choice but to strengthen their research and innovative capabilities.

Issues and Challenges

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

What I have just elaborated is the general scenario of higher education as we find it today. Clearly, there are issues that we have to deal with and challenges that we need to manage well. My objective today is to present some of the important issues and the exciting challenges in higher education within the context of the scenario just presented. I have identified three groups of issues and challenges which I hope will be further deliberated during this important conference.

Group 1

Issue: "The human capital is a function of education"

Challenge: Providing a "learner-centred curriculum" to "produce learning"

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

You will certainly agree with me that "human capital is a function of education." That indeed is the basic premise of higher education. It is a prevailing issue that will require university leaders to continue to think, plan and offer suitable academic programmes with a relevant curriculum which can enhance the full potential of the country's human resources; thus equipping them to become useful and productive members of the K-based economy.

A paradigm shift among education providers is a requirement before it can provide education for all or for lifelong learning. Thomas Kuhn (1970) states that paradigm shift occurs when “one conceptual world view is replaced by another.” Under the current environment, we should no longer think that education is only for the academic achievers. We should start thinking that every citizen has a right to education in support of the lifelong learning philosophy. In the process, we are allowing greater access to higher education, thus making the democratization of higher education a reality. We are fortunate today in the sense that the digital age comes with opportunities to leverage on ICT. At this juncture, please allow me to elaborate on this point using the example of Open University Malaysia (OUM).

OUM was established as Malaysia’s first open distance learning institution. It was also Malaysia’s seventh private university, established in August 10, 2000. Its mission is to: (a) be the leading contributor in democratizing education, (b) develop quality education through multi-mode learning technologies, and (c) develop and enhance learning experiences toward the development of a K-based society. It is driven by its motto, “University for All” and is today offering opportunities to the students who have enrolled to acquire a degree. It is Malaysia’s preferred choice for individuals who are working and unable to leave their full-time jobs or businesses. From an initial intake of 753 students in August 2001, OUM has grown to almost 25,000 students in our current September Semester.

OUM offers a blended mode of learning to cater to the various learning styles; and more significantly to provide flexibility without sacrificing the quality of its programmes. The three learning modes are: face-to-face learning, e-learning and self-managed learning. To leverage on ICT, e-learning is the means by which learners are connected to each other throughout the semester apart from the face-to-face tutorial sessions. Learners benefit from the online communities of learning, learning from and with each other as well as socializing with each other, and communicating with their tutors.

Through online teaching and learning, the democratization and humanization effects can be achieved. It is thus important to ensure that as a university, we provide adequate ICT infrastructure within the organization and for the government to provide the populace with the last mile connectivity, broadband facilities as well as affordable access to the Internet. Malaysia is fortunate to have 25 percent of its population connected to the Internet and will soon be rolling out a national broadband plan to increase the areas serviced and to cater to the more sophisticated demands of the Internet among its wired populace.

As educators, I believe that we should play our role diligently in promoting a lifelong learning culture among our populace. We have to encourage the “hunger and thirst for knowledge” in our society among both the senior citizens and the youths. We also need to constantly seek ways to promote and to reach out to those whose potential in intellectual development has not been fully developed. In short, creating a populace who wants to learn by choice rather than by chance is what we should aim for. By using ICT blended with conventional technologies, we should be able to produce more effective learning programmes for those who have the desire to learn.

Our OUM experience indicates that the utilization of ICT must be an integrated part of the overall strategic plan of the university. ICT together with conventional technologies such as print technologies are blended in the most effective way possible. Note that ICT technologies have moved from the large heavy machines placed in the back rooms to desktops to handheld and other

For many countries, including Malaysia, opportunities for higher education were at one time limited. Today, the impact of globalization on higher education has created ample opportunities for individuals to seek further education. The experience of many countries has shown that globalization and innovations in information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet, have also opened up new opportunities for education providers.

As I have said earlier, we are thus witnessing a new scenario in higher education in which universities are establishing campuses overseas or establishing their presence online to reach out to students in other countries. Many universities in the developed countries now have enrolled students from all over the world. It is a borderless world and there are no geographical barriers, where the learning activities are no longer confined to within the four walls of the classroom and the “teacher or instructor” can come from different places.

It is possible that franchised programmes or branch campuses that duplicate each other will be the mode of some of the more enterprising universities. This in essence is not unlike the McDonalozation of universities that has been referred to from time to time. In the years to come, we can foresee the massification of education that will produce quality global graduates that can fit into the working environment of most, if not all, countries.

Globalization, as highlighted in a UNESCO (2003) position paper on “Higher Education in a Globalized Society,” is “a multifaceted process with economic, social, political and cultural implications for higher education. It poses new challenges at a time when nation-states are no longer the sole providers of higher education and the academic community no longer holds the monopoly on decision-making in education.” According to the paper, this will allow the emergence of cross-border higher education provision and this may seriously affect the capacity of the state to regulate higher education within a national public policy perspective. While globalization may lead us to a borderless, transnational, trans-border and cross-border education, in the national context, we have to be aware of the other related issues, particularly relating to quality assurance of these education providers.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I would now like to highlight the third group of issues and challenges

Group 3

Issue: Education for all and lifelong learning
Challenge: Providing for open and distance learning

Higher education used to be for the privileged few – the elites and the high academic achievers. It is said that, “universities in the 19th and 20th century were autonomous elite institutions based on a homogenous culture and values of scholarship, dedicated to long-term, academic education and research, and supported by governments or charity institutions on behalf of the public good . . . Higher education in the 21st century are mass-oriented activities, culturally heterogenous, and supported by a wide array of public and private sources (Schwartzman, 1998).”

portable devices. From being hard wired to wireless combined with the Internet, technologies today offer so much more and with some ingenuity and good planning, I believe we can tap into this potential. At OUM, already learners can check their examination results and obtain other information via the SMS.

In addition, situations where learners and tutors interact both face-to-face and online are also built into our learning environment. For the online interactions, we will soon be implementing our Collaborative Online Learning (COL) model where learners meet and learn online via a process that requires them to engage not only with their peers and tutors but with the learning process. The model will help ensure that learners achieve in-depth rather than surface learning. Learners will focus on understanding concepts and processes and will be able to apply rather than mere rote learning of facts for the sole purpose of getting a degree.

This is why, among other things, OUM has spent a substantial amount of time, effort and money on the development of our Learner Management System (LMS) and the Digital Library. However, we do this bearing in mind that the needs of learners and the curriculum are the driving forces and not the ICT itself. In addition we have hired more than 1,600 tutors to provide the face-to-face tutorials throughout the country. We also have a large number of Subject-Matter Experts (SMEs) and Instructional Designers to prepare the printed modules for our courses.

Equally important, the modules are designed to be self-sufficient for learners within the context of Self-Managed Learning. These modules have in fact been one of the determining factors for the interest in enrolling at OUM. In an online poll administered through an online bulletin for OUM learners, most learners indicate that they enjoy face-to-face tutorials the most, followed by online learning and self-managed learning. This was expressed by 55.6, 25.2 and 19.2 percent of the learners who answered the online poll, respectively.

In our quest to further improve our services to our learners, we had conducted preference-satisfaction surveys to determine which of our support systems need further improvements. One of the papers to be presented at this conference by our OUM staff will elaborate on this survey results and I am proud to announce that despite being a relatively new university, our learners are generally satisfied with the services that we provide.

However, this does not mean that we must be complacent but must always endeavour to build further on our present strengths. As a private university, we need to be entrepreneurial and innovative so that we can continually ensure that we are self-sustainable. In this regard, we have to be forward-looking in mapping our strategies to sustain our capability in providing high quality education to our learners while at the same time remain viable and competitive. In short, we like to believe that we are an entrepreneurial university in the true sense of the word. We have another OUM paper in this conference that will address this issue and elaborate on our role as a catalyst in the country's national development.

Conclusion

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I hope I have shared with you my thoughts and experiences in the theme of this conference and they are useful to you. Finally, may I wish every participant present today a very rewarding conference.

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