

Ensuring Continuous Academic Mobility in a Borderless World: The Open University Malaysia Experience



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Abstract

As calls for educational advancement and multi-literacies increase globally, so too does the challenge of providing education to a more varied group of learners and consumers of knowledge. Such initiatives are often underscored by the affordances of academic mobility, that is, the ability to provide for learners from a distance through adaptive technologies and greater mobility of content and academic expertise. This paper discusses a number of challenges that have surfaced in the quest for academic mobility across geographical borders as well as across academic programmes. Additionally, the paper demonstrates how continuous academic mobility may be attained so as to yield a more fulfilling educational experience for adult distance learners. In order to provide a context for discussion on these matters, the experiences and lessons learned by the Centre for Graduate Studies, Open University Malaysia (OUM), are analysed using Dimmick and Coit's (1982) Taxonomy of Decision Making Process. The paper also presents some suggestions for overcoming the many obstacles, issues and challenges that have been brought to bear in the process of making the educational collaboration across borders a stimulating reality.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, distance education institutions have summarily attended to the challenge of providing for the educational needs of a diverse group of adult learners. In tandem to this, instructors and other academics have worked systematically to provide for learners' multifarious needs, both through on-site means as well as through various channels of communication. Central to this call for educational advancement and multi-literacies is the notion of *academic mobility*, that is, the ability to provide for learners from a distance through adaptive technologies and through greater mobility of content and academic expertise. Taken a step further, *continuous academic mobility* ensures the provision of

unremitting support not only in terms of time and space, but also in relation to the cognitive and scholarly demands of academic pursuit consistent with postgraduate study.

In the context of OUM, academic mobility in a borderless world refers to the delivery of education to students in all the 61 learning centres in Malaysia as well as other parts of the world through a variety of delivery modes (face-to-face, distance techniques, e-learning) and through different administrative arrangements with collaborative partners. Despite the use of the term “borderless world” to mean the disappearance of state and national borders, the fact remains that cross-border education does emphasize the existence of borders. The importance of borders is highlighted when it comes to regulatory responsibility, quality assurance, funding, and accreditation (See Knight 2005: 2; De Wit, Jaramillo & Knight 2005: 13). Students (and teachers) traveling to study (teach/work) in a foreign country must fulfill immigration needs; educational institutions partnering with foreign institutions to offer joint educational programmes or degrees must seek approval from the relevant state authorities. Academic partnerships between foreign partners foster student/people mobility, programme mobility as well as institutional mobility if carried out with good governance, that is, consistent management, cohesive policies, processes and decision-rights for a given area of responsibility.

This paper discusses the various challenges that have surfaced in the face of providing for academic mobility across geographical borders as well as across academic programmes. Of particular relevance to this discussion are the experiences of the Centre for Graduate Studies (CGS), Open University Malaysia (OUM), a relatively young but vibrant face in the post-graduate distance education realm.

It must be pointed out that along with this effort toward ensuring continuous academic mobility in a “borderless world”, a number of challenges have surfaced. In order to provide a context for discussion on these matters, the experiences and lessons learned by the Centre for Graduate Studies, Open University Malaysia (OUM), are analysed using Dimmick and Coit’s (1982) *Taxonomy of Decision Making Process*. This taxonomyⁱ makes it possible to focus on the individual, organisational and institutional levels of analysis.

THE CASE OF OUM

Individual Level

What is the purpose of providing academic mobility to OUM’s target clients? Besides answering to the call by the Malaysian higher education sector to turn Malaysia into a regional hub for higher education (Ahmad Faiz 2004), OUM is also playing its role to help develop a learning culture, and to help Malaysia realize her vision of becoming a value-based Knowledge Society by 2020. One of the ways is to promote and provide an opportunity for all members of society including the young and old, urban and rural, the physically handicapped and senior citizens, to pursue lifelong education.

ⁱ The taxonomy lists nine levels of analysis, viz: intra-individual/cognitive, dyadic, formal/informal group, intra-organizational, market, supra-organizational, industry, societal/ national, supranational/pan-national levels. The taxonomy allows for research to be conducted at “between levels” and “within levels” of analysis.

Table 1: Profile of Postgraduate Students at OUM in September 2007

Profile	f	%	
Sex			
Male	1069	55.2	
Female	866	44.8	
Age			
30 and below	418	21.60	
31-40	763	39.43	
41-50	505	26.09	
51-60	226	11.68	
61 and above	23	1.19	
Marital status			
Single	380	19.64	
Married	1053	54.42	
Others ... (did not state)	502	25.94	
Citizenship			
Malaysian	1914	98.9	
Non-Malaysian	21	01.1	
Geographical Location	400	20.7	**
Selangor	263	13.6	The other countries include the
Sabah	263	13.6	following:
Sarawak	243	12.6	
Wil. Persekutuan	122	6.3	China
Kelantan	104	5.4	Canada
Perak	97	5.0	United Arab Emirates
Johor	94	4.9	Indonesia
Terengganu	69	3.6	Maldives
Pahang	57	2.9	Morocco
Negri Sembilan	52	2.7	Oman
Pulau Pinang	41	2.1	Saudi Arabia
Kedah	32	1.7	Singapore
Melaka	12	0.6	Sudan
Perlis	6	0.3	Thailand
Putrajaya	3	0.16	
Singapura	13	0.6	
**Lain-lain	64	3.3	
n.a.			
TOTAL	1935	100	

– Data do not include international students registered outside Malaysia

On the local front (See Table 1), there are currently about 30 international learners who are either working in Malaysia and registered with OUM, or registered as personalised learners from their individual country of origin. Table 2 shows the postgraduate student population in Malaysia and the other four learning centres overseas between late 2003 and early 2008.

Table 2: Number of OUM Students in Master's and Doctorate Programmes, 2003-2008

Learning Centre	Total No.of Students		Graduated	
	Masters	Ph.D	Masters	Ph.D
USTY, Yemen (wef May '05)	168	-	-	-
AOU, Bahrain (wef Jan '05)	592	40	20	-
UNRI,Indonesia (wef May '05)	4	-	-	-
TEG, Singapore (wef Nov '07)	-	7	-	-
OUM centres in Malaysia (wef Sept.'03)	1841	248	72	-
TOTAL (as of Feb.2008)	2677	295	92	-

A total of 27 students have quit the Ph.D programmes, and 218 from the Master's programmes—these have been excluded from the above table. Reasons for quitting are manifold—some are personal in nature, while some are programme related. A total of 25 students have completed their Masters (more are in the process of completing) and would be graduating in August 2008.

However, a history of sorts was made in Bahrain when 18 pioneering MBA students of Arab Open University-OUM graduated at the First Convocation witnessed by the Malaysian entourage (comprising of OUM team, including the President-Vice Chancellor), representatives of the Ministry of Higher Education (including its *Ketua Pengarah*), representatives from various Institutions of Higher Education in Malaysia, and invited guests from the Ministry of Education, Bahrain, including the Minister of Education and the Chairman of the Higher Education Council of the Kingdom of Bahrain. It was a memorable cross-cultural experience for Malaysians and Bahrainians alike, apart from making OUM's presence felt in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The event enhanced the corporate image of both collaborative partners and proved to be a catalyst in speeding up the recognition of AOU as a recognised Learning Centre for OUM.

The situation in Yemen is different from AOU Bahrain. Where the pace is faster at AOU, the laid-back atmosphere in Sana'a, Yemen, has demanded a form of administrative intervention from OUM to ensure quality education for all courses and programme management.

In general, OUM postgraduate students comprise professionals and non-professionals, namely, medical officers, engineers, managers, teachers, nurses, clerks, police personnel, sales executives, accounts executives and a range of other occupations in the public and private sectors. There are currently over 70 full time academic staff at OUM and over 3,500 tutors/facilitators to service the learning centres either face-to-face and/or online. Each one is aware that he/she has the responsibility of carrying out OUM's mission—to give to all Malaysians easy access to quality education, and to understand the needs and expectations of the internal and external public of OUM, namely, the students, staff, tutors, facilitators, the community and the various stakeholders of the institution. The internal staff are constantly reminded of their pledge to uphold the shared values of the institution, namely: integrity, caring, innovativeness, dedication and professionalism. Some are also registered as students and this, hopefully, would add to their ability to empathise with their fellow learners.

Organisational Level

OUM is the seventh private university in Malaysiaⁱⁱ but the first open university in Malaysia. As a global player in open distance learningⁱⁱⁱ, OUM continuously adapts and adopts new information and communication technologies (ICT) including the state-of-the-art in mobile and digital broadcasting technologies, to ensure effective delivery of academic programmes.

OUM is Malaysia's first open distance learning institution that is owned by a consortium^{iv} of eleven public universities in Malaysia. It was officially launched in August 2002 and opened its doors to the pioneering batch of undergraduate students in August 2002. The Centre for Graduate Studies (CGS) was established in June 2003 to manage postgraduate programmes in collaboration with the various Faculties. As a relatively young stakeholder in the education industry, OUM first opened its doors to postgraduate students in Malaysia in September 2003 and across international borders in 2005. In September semester 2003, three postgraduate programmes (Master in Business Administration, Master in Management, and Master in Information Technology) were offered. By January 2008, CGS is offering 10 Master's and 5 doctoral programmes to over 2600 students in Malaysia and overseas.

In a relatively short span of time, OUM has worked in collaboration with a number of academic partners--Arab Open University (AOU), Manama, Bahrain; University of Science and Technology (USTY), Sana'a, Yemen; Trent Global (TEG), Singapore; and Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia. A number of other collaborations are also in the pipeline.

ⁱⁱ OUM was incorporated as a private university under the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996. Its vision is to be a leader and innovator in open learning. Its mission is to be the leading contributor in democratising education; to develop quality education through multimode learning technologies; and to develop and enhance learning experience toward the development of a knowledge-based society.

ⁱⁱⁱ As an open learning institution, OUM subscribes to the following principles: flexible entry requirements to provide more opportunities for members of society to pursue their aspirations; a learner-friendly academic system where the constraints and needs of working adults are well-understood; a learning mode that incorporates learners' interaction with lecturers, online learning and self-study, thus enriching learning experiences.

^{iv} The shareholders and owners of OUM are UM, UKM, USM, UiTM, UPM, UTM, UUM, IIUM, UNIMAS, UMS, and UPSI.

Supra-Organizational Level

Two postgraduate programmes are offered in collaboration with French universities, namely the University of Paul Cezanne, Aix Marseille III, France in Master of Information Science (MIS) in Competitive Intelligence (CI); and with the University of La Rochelle for Master in Information Technology (MIT-ULR). The programmes are facilitated by Malaysian academics as well as their French counterparts. These two programmes involve facilitator mobility whereby the seminar sessions are conducted at the Kuala Lumpur Learning Centre. Where the courses involve the French professors, arrangements are made (including flight, accommodation and emoluments) to ensure that they attend the 20-hour face-to-face sessions in Kuala Lumpur. The snag arises when the schedules for the seminar sessions have to be changed at the eleventh hour because of unforeseen circumstances on the part of the “flying lecturer”.

The students undertaking MIS-CI and MIT-ULR are willing to pay more in fees to take advantage of getting a double degree, one that is conferred by OUM and another by the respective French University. The degrees are also recognised in France.

Societal/National Level

In 2006, the National Accreditation Board (LAN), now known as the Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA), and Public Services Department (PSD) awarded full accreditation and recognition respectively to two Diploma programmes (DM, DIT), 11 baccalaureate degree programmes and 3 Master level programmes (Master of Business Administration--MBA, Master in Management--MM and Master in Information Technology--MIT), bringing the overall total to 16. Between November 2007 through March 2008, CGS has also undergone the evaluation process for accreditation of three other postgraduate programmes – Master in Multimedia Communication (MMC), Master of Environmental Science (Integrated Water Resource Management) (MES_IWRM), and Master of Education (M.Ed). And the process continues for each of the other postgraduate programme.

The accreditation and recognition awarded to the postgraduate programmes may not be important for those in the private sector, but is very crucial for those professionals who are currently serving in the public sector. This is one of the reasons for discontinuation of postgraduate studies by some OUM students, and for a decline in the M.Ed student intake for 2007 and 2008. The accreditation panel currently comprises academics in the relevant academic discipline from the public Institutions of Higher Education, who are more often so used to the conventional mode of teaching. The closest experience they may get to open distance learning (ODL) mode is the off-campus long distance learning currently implemented in their dual mode campuses. This poses a point of contention for OUM.

Pan-National Level

OUM has also made inroads to other countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Maldives by providing customised professional development courses through the international arm of its Institute of Professional Development (IPD).

In 2006, OUM has signed a total of five Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and three (3) Memoranda of Agreement (MoA). These include the MoA with Ta'aheel (Dubai, UAE) and Islamic Development Bank (Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia); and MoU with the National Institute of Accountants Australia and Ministry of Higher Education (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). Strategic collaborations have also been forged at the level of the OUM Group Management with 28 institutions of higher learning from countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Yemen, Egypt, Bangladesh, Korea, and Sudan.

In terms of intellectual discourses, OUM has also been active in its networking through institutional memberships such as the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) and the South East Asia Association for Institutional Research (SEAAIR).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Needless to say, the cross-border experiences have enriched OUM and made it better prepared for future challenges. The many lessons learned can help OUM in its future plans to ensure continuous academic mobility for students, facilitators, workers and other personnel. Additionally, OUM (and CGS) will also need to increase its understanding and appreciation of the cultural diversity among its corporate citizens and students. In the process, OUM will continue to be challenged by the complex and multi-faceted global dimension of higher education, in particular, the future collaboration in open distance learning. Strategic plans will continue to be made to overcome obstacles, issues and challenges that have been brought to bear in the process of decision-making.

As highlighted by Knight (2005), “the complexities involved in working in the field of internationalization require additional knowledge, attitudes, skills, and understandings about the international/intercultural/global dimension of higher education....These competencies need to be developed and recognised for academics, administrators, and policymakers” to ensure sustainability (and due recognition) of the academic programmes at both the domestic and global levels.

There will continue to be a global demand for higher education, especially lifelong learning and professional training, and despite the presence of many different education providers, (including commercial companies, private for-profit institutions, for-profit entities of public institutions, and “degree mills”), quality providers with high academic standards will find its rightful niche in the competitive education industry.

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