

Accessibility and Opportunities in Tertiary Education: Borderless and “Pedalaman”



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Abstract

Currently, the infrastructure in much of East Malaysia and the eastern coast of Peninsular Malaysia are still relatively undeveloped as compared to most parts of Malaysia. As a result, for many decades people living in these very remote areas (“pedalaman”) have been deprived of a good quality of life including education. In its attempt to democratize education and make education available to all, Open University Malaysia (OUM) conducted a special programme for teachers teaching in these areas of the country. This paper addresses responses to the provision of this learning opportunity despite inaccessible and difficult conditions that they are in. Responses are gathered via questionnaires and interviews sent to them in five different locations using the 5-point Likert scale. Students are asked about teaching methods, contents, delivery, audio-visual and other teaching aids, such as myLMS, SMS, telephone, fax, e-mail to determine the viability of the programme and its suitability to this group of learners. The results indicated that the in spite of all the hardships, the teachers are very keen to pursue knowledge and will seek any available means to attain knowledge. Hence, the programme is indeed viable and should be spread to other “pedalaman” areas of the country.

Keywords: Open and distance university, very remote areas, Likert Scale, teaching methods

For decades, people and school-going children, living in the very remotest area of the country (“pedalaman”) have been deprived of a good quality of life including education. In an attempt to democratize education and make education available to all, Open University Malaysia (OUM), in collaboration with the Teacher Training Division, of the Ministry of Education, conducted a special programme for teachers teaching in this part of the country. These teachers, 183 in all, were placed in five different teachers training colleges, three colleges in the east Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and two in Peninsula Malaysia. As an initial step, the group had to undergo 14 weeks of intensive courses (covering seven courses, equivalent to 21 credit hours) and should obtain at least 2.00 academic level.

This paper addresses responses to the provision of this learning opportunity despite inaccessible and difficult conditions that they are in. Responses are gathered via questionnaire and interviews sent to them in five different location using the 5-point Likert scale. For this study, the respondents are restricted to 52 learners (all based at Keningau Teachers College, Sabah) and they are identified accordingly as stipulated in the college manual. Students are asked about teaching methods, contents, delivery, audio-visual and other teaching aids, such as myLMS, SMS, telephone, fax, e-mail to determine the viability of the programme and its suitability to this group of learners.

The Study

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| Respondents: | 51 in-service teachers |
| Entry Requirement for the programme: | Malaysian School Certificate, have served for 5 years and more as a teacher |
| Gender: | Male: 36 Female: 15 |
| Age: | 40 years and above: 25 35-39 years: 16 30-34 years: 07 below 30 years: 03 |
| Area identified: | “Pedalaman” (interior) |
| Face-to-face encounter: | Keningau Teachers College, state of Sabah, Malaysia; spent 14 weeks for intensive courses |
| Instruments: | Questionnaire Interviews |

Out of 183 respondents from the five colleges, fifty one respondents are identified at the Keningau Teachers College. Keningau is two-hour drive from the state capital of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Currently they are majoring in social science and minoring in physical education and visual arts. The respondents come from far flung areas of the state where most of their schools are situated. One student, however, is from an area called Lawas, in the neighbouring state of Sarawak. He has to travel for 8 hours before could reach the college.

Having undergone 14 weeks of intensive courses and having achieved a grade-point average of 2.00 points and above, these students enrolled themselves into a four-year degree programme with Open University Malaysia, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. To get the degree they have to accumulate 120 credit hours in eight semesters. In a normal setting a student pursuing the Bachelor in Teaching programme will receive their lectures once in a fortnight, two hours per subject and five times per semester. In all they will receive 10 hours of lectures and tutorials. Since this is a special group, their lectures will be conducted during the school holidays, in the month of March, May and November of each year. Apart from the face-to-face interaction, students will be exposed to other means of information-gathering, chiefly, e-mail, SMS, myLMS, telephone and fax. On registering each student will be given his/her call number as well as password. Using these two facilities they should be able to interact not only with their friends and lecturers, but they will have access to books, journals, magazines, thesis or dissertation, found in OUM's digital library. A required text, that is, the module for each course will be given to each student and this covers content areas per se. Such is the scenario 'pedalaman's' students will undergo when they attend classes or when they are on their own.

Two separate instruments are used in the conduct this study, the questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire and interviews are well structured to determine nature of the programme, accessibility and opportunities pertaining to tertiary education and usage of various technologies to expedite their teaching learning activities. Apart from the background information, questions pertaining to academic matters (calculated on a 5-point-Likert scale) like the following are put to the students to get their necessary responses. Such questions are like:

1. The quality of teaching delivered by the lecturers at the college during the tutorial period is excellent?
2. The learning environment is conducive and comforting.
3. I am happy with the time allotted for tutorials, revision and examination?
4. The examination question set for each course is moderate.
5. The examination question is related to learning outcomes.
6. The assignment format given to us is well planned and structured?
7. The date set for us to receive the modules is on time.
8. The class schedule is well-laid out as planned.
9. My communication with the programme coordinator is excellent.
10. My communication with OUM's administrator is fine.
11. I am happy with the delivery of this programme.
12. Lecturers at the college have done their homework well.

Apart from the preceding responses, questions on the strengths and weaknesses of the programme, some of the things most demanding when pursuing this programme as well as the content of the modules are also put forward for their responses.

The interview questions are mostly based on personal information with regards to family background, career in the teaching profession and one's own desire to pursue the current programme. With regards to teaching experience, 45 respondents had a total teaching experience of more than 10 years, 6 respondents had 6 years of teaching experience and none below five years. When asked number of children each had, on the average each had between four to six children. The interview questions also cover use internet facilities (especially the myLMS, e-mail forum, e-library) and other facilities created/ offered by OUM, answers move from positive to negative. As expected, the negative answers are well-received because such internet facilities are not available in these remote areas where they are teaching. However, once they venture out, traveling to the city or to the college, they will use every possible means at their disposal to make the necessary communication with their lecturers, friends, education officers and others. They will also find time to access the necessary information for their assignments and related subjects. In fact they cannot even use their mobile phone in those areas, what more the internet accessibility. However, what draws the researcher to tears and emotions was the respondents readiness to pursue their studies despite the hardships they have to encounter and despite being away from their loved ones when they are teaching in the remote schools but also when attending classes during the school holidays. Their sacrifices should be duly respected and honoured.

Looking at the data (as outlined in the appendix 1 and 2) we can see 50 respondents come from Keningau area, while one is from Kuala Lipis, in the state of Pahang. There are 36 males and 15 females, with an age range between 30 years to above 40 years old. Fifty of them are married while one remains a bachelor. A majority of them had a teaching of more than 10 years.

When referring to Appendix 3, readers will get a better picture of this group of students. For example, when asked about the school enrolments, the lowered number reported is 40 students (question 10). And when asked about their school (question 11), that is which category has it been placed, majority said B category (21 respondents), that is the middle category among the 'pedalaman' schools.

The following are some other major questions answered by respondents:

- Question 14: with regards to electricity – 23 respondents said they do not have electricity connected to their schools
- Question 17: on teaching aids – 44 respondents said they have only blackboard
- Question 18: on monitoring – 41 said their headmaster monitors them
- Question 21: on what level they are teaching now: 15 respondents they are teaching level one
- Question 33: on contacts with OUM – use of phone when line available
- Question 34: on use of MyLMS/e-library – 49 respondents said they are not available

Conclusion

The study has shown that despite respondents' own drawbacks and hardships, in many areas; having to teach in the very interior of the country, that is, in the 'pedalaman', having denied all the equipments which would necessitate maximize teaching and learning, and other hazards and difficulties, this group survive the ordeal. They felt that the programme, not only should be retained but need to be expanded to other 'pedalaman' areas, thus catering more students in the interior of the country, especially in the state of Sabah and Sarawak. They are also very keen to pursue knowledge and will seek any available means to attain those knowledge. Based on the result of the study, inaccessibility to modern technology, such as telephone, computers (use of e-mail, to access OUM's MyLMS , such as e-library, forum, chit-chat and other facilities) this group felt indebted to the Teacher Training Division of the Ministry of Education and to Open University Malaysia, for giving them the opportunities , not only to excel themselves academically but to make themselves better equipped in the teaching profession. Such an attitude augers well for the teaching profession, more so, for this group who failed to enter the universities in their younger days. The researcher believes that the programme is indeed viable and should be spread out to other parts of the country.