

ICT AS AN ENABLER FOR LIFELONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

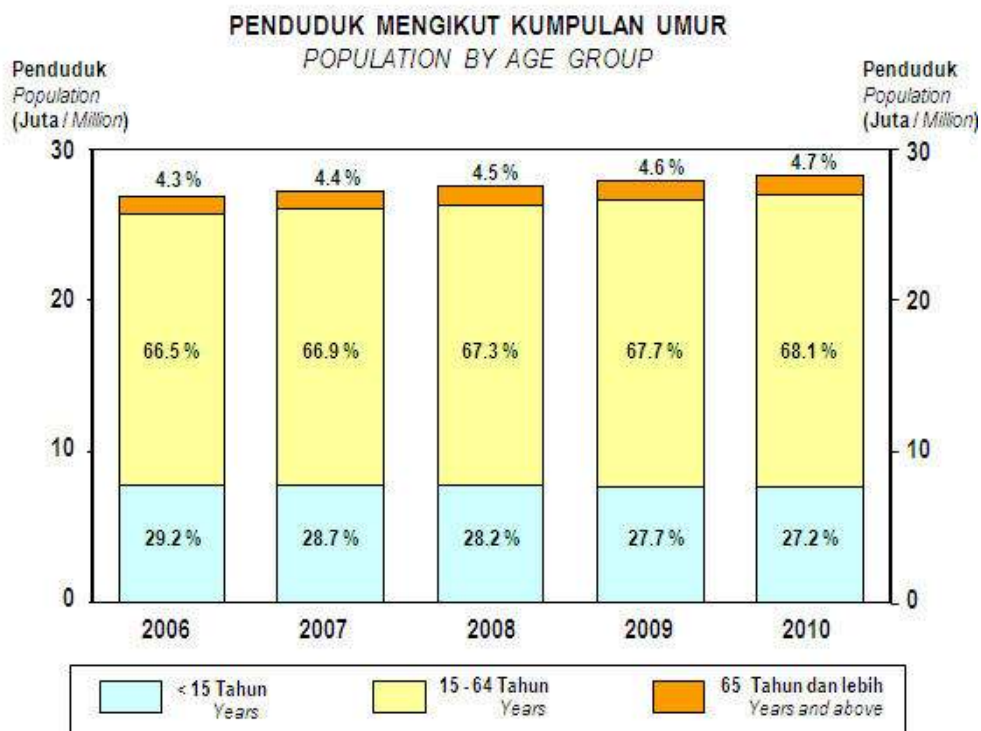
The 2000 Census indicated that 6.3% of Malaysia's population were aged 60 years and above. Currently, about 10.7 million of Malaysia's total population of 27.7 million are in the workforce of which 22.5% are between 40–49 years old and 15.0% between 50–65 years old. The above statistics, coupled with declining birth rates and higher life expectancies, will see Malaysia having higher percentage of older citizens in the near future. While this segment of the population are out of their productive manpower category, their potentials can still be harnessed to benefit the society. A National Policy on Elderly, established in 1995, has one of its objectives “to develop the potential of the elderly so that they remain active and productive in national development and to create opportunities for them to continue to live independently”. How can this be achieved? It is generally agreed that lifelong learning is one way for the elderly to develop their potentials and provide opportunities to enrich their lives.

In the past two decades, advances in ICT has transformed the way we live, work, interact and acquire knowledge. Open University Malaysia (OUM) has effectively leveraged on ICT and other technologies to offer flexible, affordable and quality education. This paper describes how OUM leverages on ICT to provide education experience that is responsive to the varying learners' needs and aspirations. More specifically, it examines the issues and challenges in utilising ICT to provide education for all (including the elderly). The paper also demonstrates that ICT can be an effective enabler in providing lifelong learning opportunities to the elderly to enhance their potentials.

INTRODUCTION

1. The 2000 Census indicated that 6.3% of Malaysia's population were aged 60 years and above. Currently, about 10.7 million of Malaysia's total population of 27.7 million are in the workforce of which 22.5% are between 40–49 years old and 15.0% between 50–65 years old. The above statistics, coupled with declining birth rates and higher life expectancies, will see Malaysia having higher percentage of older citizens in the near future.

Figure 1: Population by Age Group



Source: Department of Statistic Malaysia (2010)

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independently”. How can this be achieved? It is generally agreed that lifelong learning is one way for the elderly to develop their potentials and provide opportunities to enrich their lives.

3. This paper describes how OUM leverages on ICT to provide education experience that is responsive to the varying learners’ needs and aspirations. More specifically, it examines the issues and challenges in utilising ICT to provide education for all (including the elderly). The paper also demonstrates that ICT can be an effective enabler in providing lifelong learning opportunities to the elderly to enhance their potentials.

THE NATIONAL POLICY FOR ELDERLY

1. The elderly are defined as those who are 60 years old and above. This definition is based on that made at the World Assembly on Aging in Vienna in 1982.
2. In October 1995 the National Policy for Older Persons was established as follows:

“To ensure the social status, dignity and well being of older persons as members of the family, society and nation by enabling them to optimise their self potential, have access to all opportunities and have provision for care and Protection.”
3. For the success of the implementation of the National Policy for the Elderly, integrated and comprehensive efforts have to be taken by the concerned agencies, including:
 - a. **Education** – Education and training are to be made available for the elderly to develop their potential to the optimum. The school curriculum is to include education on the family to enable the younger generation to understand and appreciate the elderly.
 - b. **Employment** – The elderly are encouraged to continue contributing to national development through employment according to their respective experience and skills. In this way, they are able to be independent with respect to income and their well-being.

- c. ***Participation in society*** – The elderly are encouraged to involve themselves in family and societal activities to enable them to play their role in their family and society besides interacting among themselves.
4. The upgrading of one's knowledge or skill will also allow mobility in one's occupation or job; thus adding value to one's contribution to society. In other words, Malaysians, regardless of age, must incessantly acquire knowledge, skills and competencies through lifelong learning in order to face current and future challenges.

LIFELONG LEARNING

5. Lifelong learning can be defined in many ways; the simplest being it is learning from “cradle to grave”. The European Commission defines lifelong learning as “all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (ESAE, 2007).
6. Thus, lifelong learning is about acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from pre-school years to post-retirement. It promotes the development of knowledge and competencies which will enable each citizen to adapt to the knowledge-based society and actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, taking more control of his or her future. It is also about valuing all forms of learning, including: formal learning, such as a degree course followed at university; non-formal learning, such as vocational skills acquired at the workplace; and informal learning, such as learning how to play an instrument together with friends.
7. The Malaysian Government has recognised the need for an “education revolution” especially with respect to our aspiration to become a developed nation by 2020 and thus incorporated Enculturation of Lifelong Learning as one of the seven strategic thrusts of its National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) in 2007.

8. Lifelong learning must become part of a culture and lifestyle in order for the society to adapt to the current pace of globalisation and technological advancement.

ICT ADVANCEMENT

1. In the past two decades, advances in ICT has transformed the way we live, work, interact and acquire knowledge.
2. ICT can be an enabler for lifelong learning opportunities for older people in Malaysia, as it allows for: (i) flexibility to access information at anytime from anywhere; (ii) personalized or individualize learning; and (iii) compensate for disabilities or lack of mobility option for the elderly.
3. We can leverage on the use of ICT to support and facilitate a diverse range of sources of educational provision from which learners can choose from.
4. European Commission (2007) has recommends action plan for “Ageing well in the information society” to empower its older citizens to generate benefits for businesses, economy and society at large, through the use of ICT.
5. An alternative to affordable and flexible education can be obtained through Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, such Open University Malaysia (OUM), Malaysia first ODL’s university, whom has effectively leveraged on ICT and other technologies since its inception in 2001.

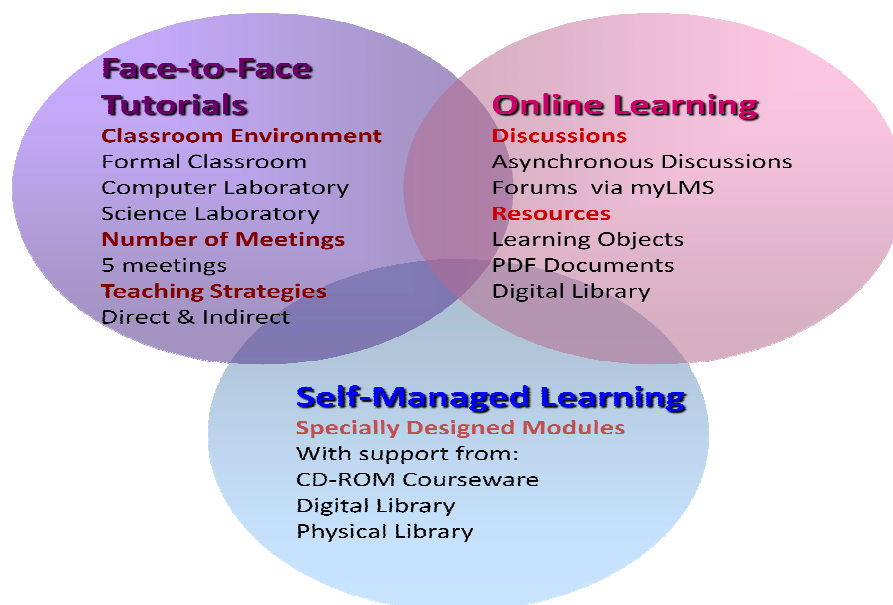
OUM

6. OUM’s programmes are based on the philosophy of lifelong learning. In line with its motto “University for All,” OUM provides people with the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills throughout their life, so that they could function well in society and keep up with the constantly changing demands of their working life.
7. Beginning with just 4 programmes, the University now offers 71 programmes. In terms of student numbers, the University has grown at a rapid pace, from just

753 learners in August 2001 semester to a cumulative intake of more than 94,000 learners at the beginning of the May 2010 semester. Thus far, more than 26,000 learners have graduated.

8. Currently OUM has 1,255 learners aged 50 years and above. About 700 are active in the current semesters, with majority of them (56%) pursuing their first degree.
9. Unlike other universities in Malaysia, OUM's blended pedagogy is actually its strongest selling point. Its face-to-face tutorial method is supplemented further by online learning via its online Virtual Learning Environment (myVLE).
10. Other learners' support materials and services are digital library, physical libraries of OUM and other 11 public universities, computer and science laboratories, specially OUM's designed CD-ROM courseware and printed modules.
11. Some of the learning materials and resources for OUM students include audio modules, i-radio, i-weblets, i-Cast, i-tutorials and web-based modules.

Figure 1: OUM's Blended Pedagogy



12. Another of our ICT achievements, our digital library, currently holds 23 multi-discipline online databases, comprising e-books, e-journals, e-dissertations and

e-newspapers. The library has more than 52,000 e-books and 22,000 e-journals, making it one of the largest online resources in Malaysia. This impressive collection is easily accessible online from anywhere in the world.

13. A compulsory module namely Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners (ODL) is designed to prepare learners with the necessary skills to study via ODL mode. Learners will be taught: (i) how to be an independent or self-managed learner; (ii) about the component of PC, the internet and OUM's Virtual Learning Environment (MyVLE); and (iii) various learning skills.

ISSUES & CHALLENGES

14. OUM to some extent has been able to promote lifelong learning through ODL mode to those aged 50 and above. However, there are several issues and challenges that need to be addressed if we wish to realize the full potential of ICT as an enabler for lifelong learning opportunities for the elderly. These are:
 - a. The elderly ICT skills are non-existent or very low.
 - b. To develop user friendly
 - c. ICT training for the elderly. Majority of the elderly are not technology inclined.
 - d. Financial constraint

CONCLUSION

15. Based on the experience of Open University Malaysia (OUM), the first ODL university in Malaysia, we believe ICT is an enabler for accessible, flexible and affordable lifelong learning. Through open and flexible learning and leveraging on ICT, lifelong learning will contribute towards increasing the economic and social well-being of the elderly in Malaysia.

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