

ENHANCING INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY: A CASE FOR OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is a unique Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution, as it operates as a private university that is indirectly owned by the Malaysian government through a consortium of the nation's 11 public universities. OUM first opened its doors in 2001, with an inaugural intake of 753 learners into four academic programmes. Eight years on, the University now has a learner enrolment of 84,000 with almost 70 programmes and 61 learning centres nationwide.

This phenomenal growth signifies the acceptance of ODL as a viable channel for higher education attainment in Malaysia. In our experience, this growth has also come with challenges that must be addressed appropriately.

This paper describes a number of innovations undertaken recently at OUM in order to address those challenges and at the same time enhance its effectiveness and efficiency.

Introduction

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was established as the nation's premier Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution on 10 August 2000. As the first and premier ODL institution in the country, it is committed to providing learning experiences that are affordable yet of the highest quality to its learners. It constantly assesses itself and focuses its efforts on continuous internal improvements to ensure that it is able to meet the needs of its learners.

OUM first opened its doors in August 2001, with an inaugural intake of 753 learners. To date, OUM has a cumulative enrolment of more than 84,000 learners and has produced more than 13,000 graduates. For any given semester, the average number of active

learners is about 38,000. OUM currently offers 70 programmes at 61 learning centres located nationwide.

For overseas operations, OUM has set up partnerships with local institutions in Bahrain, Yemen and the Maldives. There are about 1,000 active learners who are enrolled with our overseas partners.

Prior to the May 2009 semester 2009, OUM has been practising a three-semester system per academic year. The system comprises of two long semesters (15 weeks) and one short semester (8 weeks).

Learners are provided with printed modules as the main learning materials. In a semester, learners can register between one to three courses. As learning support, tutors provide face-to-face tutorials at the learning centres. The tutorials are held fortnightly and there are ten face-to-face contact hours per course. In between the face-to-face tutorials, learners are required to learn on their own through self-managed learning. For collaborative online learning or e-learning, learners make use of the Learning Management System developed by OUM. A vast collection of e-books and e-journals are made available to the learners through the digital library.

In term of assessment, OUM currently adopts the traditional mode of assessment namely: assignments, a laboratory component, mid-term and final examinations. Based on past studies, the average attrition rate at OUM is about 20%.

OUM's phenomenal growth signifies the acceptance of ODL as a viable channel for higher education attainment in Malaysia. Being a relatively new university, OUM takes great pride in being able to attract quite a significant number of learners in a relatively short time. Nevertheless, in view of strong competition from local distance education providers, OUM needs to continuously innovate with a view to enhance institutional effectiveness and efficiency.

OUM Learners

For OUM to remain effective and efficient, first and foremost it must know its clients, i.e. the learners. The majority of OUM learners (97%) are working adults and more than 80% are in the 26-45 age group. About 60% are married and their main goal of choosing OUM as their place of study is to obtain either a Diploma or a Degree (Bachelor's, Masters or Ph.D.) for career promotion and advancement. Obviously they are highly motivated; they are driven by their intrinsic motivation to achieve greater heights in their professional and personal lives. It is commonly known that adult learners are self-directed and they enjoy independence in managing their studies. They learn best when they view the potential outcome to be of personal value to them. Being more experienced in life, they tend to learn well, though much slower compared to younger students. They also expect the learning to have immediate applicability in their lives. They have opinions of their own and may reject new information if it does not "fit" into their life experiences.

Feelings of achievement, self-worth and self-esteem are very important to adult learners. As asserted by Knowles [1], there are six aspects that must be taken into account for the adult learners; whereby they have a tendency to need to know why something is important prior to learning it; they are responsible for their own decisions; their experiences are important to them; they are ready to learn when the content are relevant to their lives and life-centred; and they are primarily motivated by internal forces [2].

Enhancing Effectiveness and Efficiency

The following section outlined several innovations undertaken within the past two years at OUM. The innovations come about as result of internal research as well as based on inputs from our tutors and learners. All the innovations have been implemented to enhance effectiveness and efficiency so that OUM remains current, relevant, competitive and sustainable.

Access

According to Barrack Obama, current President of the United States of America [3], “All of us must recognise that education and innovation will be the currency of the 21st century”.

Realising the importance of education in transforming a nation, OUM, as the leading provider of distance education in Malaysia, must endeavour to provide access to as many learners as possible. By widening access, OUM can play an effective role in assisting our government to develop the human capital of this country. Also, OUM must continuously innovate so as to remain competitive.

The very idea of ODL lies within the premise that education should be made available to all. At OUM, one of the fundamental strategies for widening the access to tertiary education is the Open Entry system. The first of its kind to be implemented in Malaysia, admission through Open Entry is awarded to individuals who wish to pursue tertiary education albeit they only have a basic educational background. Open Entry allows such applicants to enrol into the programmes of their choice based on prior learning acquired through formal and informal training as well as life and work experiences that can compensate for the lack of actual paper qualifications. This system has been in effect since May 2006 and OUM has admitted almost 3,000 Open Entry learners thus far. What has been heartening for the university is the fact that these learners have proven to be just as good as, if not better than, traditional entry learners.

A new development in the Open Entry admission system is the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). In essence, APEL will be incorporated as a mechanism to provide ‘advanced standing’ to learners based on the learning outcomes for a particular course in a particular programme. Basically, this means that Open Entry learners will receive formal recognition for the skills and knowledge they already possess that would allow them to enter into an academic programme at a different stage to normal admission.

Candidates must match their experiential learning against the learning outcomes in a course, providing the necessary evidence for support; after which their body of knowledge will be assessed by faculty members at OUM. Provided that the candidates can meet at least 70 per cent of the given learning outcomes, they will be awarded Prior Experiential Learning Credits that will exempt them from that particular course.

This is another big step towards making education within the reach of anyone who desires it. Equally important to ODL and OUM, we anticipate that APEL will certainly enhance the current system for Open Entry, provide even greater access and encourage more non-traditional candidates to enrol into the university.

Question Bank

Another area of concern to the top management of OUM is the adoption of technologies to facilitate the efficient operations of the university. In particular, the university has observed that the current method of assessment leads to cases of plagiarism, a high processing cost for the university, long turnaround time and low reliability in terms of marking standards.

In order to address all these issues, OUM is introducing a new assessment system based on multiple-choice questions (MCQs) or items. MCQs as an assessment format offers several benefits, e.g. objectivity (by eliminating variations in marking styles), efficiency (because they can be used to test a greater range of the syllabus) and ease of marking (as this can be done automatically) [4]. To facilitate this initiative, a question bank software was developed, with the assistance of two external consultants to provide advice to the university.

In the initial phase that was initiated in May 2009, seven compulsory courses were selected to use MCQs as their assessment format. Each course is assessed based on mid-semester and final examinations, both of which will comprise entirely of MCQs. To assure their quality, the MCQs have been carefully selected and moderated before migration into the bank. As such, the MCQs can be reused in subsequent semesters by generating different, non-repeating examination questions for each cycle. As exam questions can be independently generated by the bank's software and grading is performed electronically using an Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) machine, this can translate into cost-saving for each examination cycle, and also means a quick turnaround time. By relying on OMR, grades will also be very reliable, thereby eliminating the problem of subjectivity and bias in the marking exercise.

Another additional advantage of MCQs is that questions can be used to test the learners' understanding at the end of every topic listed in the module. Such practice questions can thereby progressively facilitate teaching and learning processes throughout the semester. Through post-administrative analyses of examination questions, the university can make further improvements to the quality of the items. Thus, the overall standard of the assessment system will be enhanced over time.

On the whole, the university anticipates that the introduction of MCQs and the question bank will tremendously increase institutional effectiveness and efficiency by encouraging learners to read printed modules and providing continuous feedback to the learners.

Mobile Learning

OUM has conducted a survey to confirm that 99 per cent of our learners possess mobile telephones. With about 38,000 geographically distributed learners active during any given semester, it is imperative for the university to stay connected to each and every learner to ensure that they remain interested in studying and in so doing, keep the university's attrition rate low. Mobile learning (popularly abbreviated to m-learning) is the newest technological development to be embraced towards this end. Effective in the May 2009 semester, all new learners enrolled into the compulsory "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners" course are involved in a pilot m-learning project. Each learner who has registered a mobile telephone number with the university will receive two to three short text messages per week during the entire semester. The messages that are sent to learners are in the form of small 'chunks' of content, reminders and motivational phrases.

These text messages are designed as such to be able to engage and connect with the learners, encourage them to learn and give them a sense of belonging to the university. With the condition that the messages are well-formulated, m-learning should be able to bring considerable benefits to the learners as well as the university, especially by keeping the learners interested and motivated in order to maintain retention levels at the university.

i-Radio

Besides m-learning, OUM has also ventured into i-Radio, which is broadcasted via Internet. It presents module-based as well as general infotainment segments. The most practical characteristic of i-Radio is the downloadable audio files or podcasts. Learners who miss a broadcast that is aired at a particular time can easily download the audio files into a personal computer, MP3 player or a mobile telephone. Learners can subscribe at no charge to the audio materials that are updated, and listen to the podcast at their own convenience, any time and anywhere. How does podcasting help remote learners? When learners travel to the learning centres on their tutorial days, they can access the i-Radio segments from computer laboratories, and download the podcasts into their mobile telephones or laptops. They can listen to the podcast when they get back to their workplace, without the need for Internet connection. For visually-impaired students, OUM has developed audio books, and to date there are 13 audio books that are made available not just for the visually-impaired, but to all other learners as well. Podcasts offer great flexibility to learners, constant access to learning materials and freedom to choose materials that suit their learning styles, adding value to the learners' open and distance learning experience.

Three-Equal Semester System

The relatively short learning time in the short May semester creates constraints to both the learners and the university. For the learners, they are only allowed to register not more than two courses and must complete all coursework and assessment within an eight-week timeline. During this short semester, the university is also not able to offer higher level courses and administer mid-semester examinations. As such, assessment is based solely on assignment and the final examinations. From what we have gathered, learners also find the short timeframe to be an obstacle to studying properly.

In order to overcome all the issues mentioned above, OUM has recently introduced a three-equal semester system. In this system, the May semester is extended to 17 weeks; equal to the January and September semesters. This new system has been introduced in May 2009, through which, any course can be offered in any semester, and the assessment system (inclusive of mid-semester examinations where required) can be standardised throughout the academic year. Learners are now able to register for up to three courses every semester, bringing their yearly maximum to nine courses. This will translate into shortening their duration of study by an entire semester – a development that we believe will be much welcomed by our learners.

e-Resource Centre for Mathematics Learning

One subject matter that has proven to be a great challenge for many learners is Mathematics. There is a continuing concern with the success rates of learners enrolled in Mathematics courses at OUM. This troubling scene points to a lack of preparation and basic skills on the learners' part and thus, there is a clear need for better support in this area to help learners improve their Mathematics skills, be better prepared and in turn, help increase their chances to succeed.

As a support and retention initiative, the OUM e-Resource Centre for Mathematics Learning (eRCML) was established to function mainly as a learning and resource centre for those who need help in Mathematics and/or would like to review early Mathematics topics. This will be of great help to the learners as well as faculty members, as eRCML will supply a variety of resources, including notes, learning objects, practice problems, interactive tutorials and useful links.

Pilot-tested in the middle of 2009, the Centre will also offer 24-hour online tutoring services; where learners can obtain real-time help from online tutors around the clock. This service will be made free for all registered learners and we hope that it will aid learners who have issues with all quantitative-based courses at OUM.

ICTs

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are the mainstay for OUM and other like institutions. ICTs provide the resources required for the university's pedagogy and delivery system, and are essential for effective communication between the management,

academics, tutors and learners. With new developments being unveiled all the time, it is an imperative that OUM keeps up in order to remain relevant and resilient amongst other ODL providers. Just several of the new applications that have been adopted by OUM include Twitter and Facebook. The former is an up-and-coming micro-blogging service that allows its users to post and read real-time short messages over multiple networks and devices, whilst the latter is a very current free-access social networking utility used by over 200 million people worldwide.

As an illustration, Twitter has been used in the m-learning pilot project, where messages that are sent to learners' mobile telephones will be listed as Twitter entries in the designated profile of the "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners" course. Properly leveraging on such new trends will certainly boost the learning experience at OUM, making the delivery of ODL more efficient and smooth through the effective dissemination of relevant information. As highlighted by Montgomery Kasik (2008), Ewan McIntosh had commented in the January 11, 2008 issue of *The Economist* that social networking will "help learners become more world-aware, more communicative, learning from each other, understanding first hand what makes the world go around" [5].

Another technological headway that has continuously evolved is the university's Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Sanusi (TSDAS) Digital Library. Realising the need for academic resources to be easily, freely and digitally accessible to all the learners throughout the country, OUM makes it a point to ensure that the Digital Library is made constantly available and possesses ample and relevant materials. It also organises workshops to teach and train new learners how to make full use of the library. Currently, the TSDAS Digital Library holds more than 22,000 volumes of books and also subscribes to online databases that consist of more than 72,500 e-books and about 30,000 e-journal titles.

Physical Infrastructure

Equally important to our learners is the physical infrastructure of the university. Currently, OUM has 61 learning centres nationwide. With classes being held every fortnight, it is important for the university to provide learners with a conducive teaching and learning environment; complete with classrooms, well-designed laboratories, resource centres and prayer rooms. Procuring our own buildings and infrastructure in every major location is therefore another important initiative at OUM, aimed at further improving the efficient and effective running of the university. The university observes that it is able to attract a significant number of new learners in those states with our own learning centres. By the end of 2009, OUM will have its own learning centres in every state of Malaysia with the exception of only two states.

The English Language

Communicating in English is a concern not only for OUM learners, but the general Malaysian demographics as well. However, OUM realises that a strong command of English is necessary in order for our learners and Malaysians to compete at the global front. It is with this in mind that the university migrated to the English language, effective

in January 2009. All learning materials are prepared and/or gradually translated into the English language, with English as the main medium in the classroom.

The university is aware that many may still have problems with the language. Thus, effective in the September 2009 semester, OUM will also be offering intensive English courses to all learners who require them. These courses will help to prepare learners to study and communicate in English with the hope that they will leave OUM as confident and well-spoken graduates, ultimately and effectively representing the university.

Support Services

a) Online Academic Counselling

In order to serve the working adults effectively, OUM makes available comprehensive academic and support systems so as to enhance learners' capacities to become self-directed lifelong learners. More importantly, learner support services play a pivotal role in learner retention and learner success. In OUM, the Retention and Counselling Unit which operates under the Centre for Student Management plays a key role in encouraging learners to participate fully in their academic life and going through a holistic experience while they grow both intellectually and emotionally in OUM. A major and important initiative under this unit is academic advising and counselling.

Face-to face academic counselling forms the core of OUM's retention intervention targeting 'at risk' learners (those with CGPA<2.0 who are under academic probation). Academic counselling is conducted professionally by tutors who have been trained in counselling. However, the take up rate of face-to-face counselling is very poor and reasons for the low take up rate given by learners include: (i) they are very busy and have no time to see their academic counsellor (ii) they feel embarrassed to see an academic counsellor and (iii) they have doubts about the confidentiality of the counselling session.

To overcome the problems associated with the low take up rate above, OUM introduced *online academic counselling*, where the counselling is conducted strictly between the learner and the counsellor in an online environment and in strict confidence. Since its implementation January 2009, we have seen a few thousand learners being advised, guided and counselled by 10 regionally selected tutors via the *online academic counselling* platform.

b) E-Customer Relationship Management (E-CRM)

As mentioned above, the learning experience at OUM is supported by a range of services and facilities. These services and facilities are subject to on-going monitoring and review in order to ensure a high level of learner satisfaction. The Learner Services Centre (LSC) is a one-stop centre to cater to the needs of its learners and all their enquiries via emails, faxes and phones. As the number of learners grows, there is an urgent need for a more robust system to capture and track all incoming enquiries. The Solidus E-Care software that has been installed and used ever since OUM started its operations deals only with incoming phone calls made via the institution's special number. In addition to the

Solidus E-Care, OUM is presently developing its own E-Customer Relationship Management System (E-CRM). E-CRM is a unique customer relationship management software suite. The system helps the user keep track of customer requests/complaints made through the Customer Care Ticket module. This system is far superior and more robust compared to the Online Helpdesk used previously.

The introduction of the E-CRM will improve LSC's efficiency and effectiveness in handling all complaints and enquiries. The system will automatically generate reports as and when required by the user, the most useful feature of E-CRM is that it enables all enquiries to be distributed to the relevant units/departments/faculties for timely responses. Critical and difficult issues obtained from the generated reports are deliberated upon in a Customer Care Committee Meeting held on a regular semester basis. Common issues are highlighted, in order to come up with improvement measures, and also to avoid similar issues from recurring.

c) Call Centre

Prior to the setting up of the *Call Centre*, the Retention and Counselling Unit makes calls to 'non-registered' and 'dormant' learners to woo them back into the system, so as to enable them to continue and complete their studies. It is also the responsibility of the Retention and Counselling Unit to identify reasons why they decide to lay off and to provide the necessary advice and help, to ease them back into their studies. However, the calling was not done in a concerted manner; it was done when staff is not engaged with other tasks; and was not done in a continuous manner.

To ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency of the calling of our 'inactive' learners, a proper call centre was set up, and two staff were fully assigned to the specific task of calling. Regular reports of the call centre enable the relevant parties to intervene, and just after the next registration, learners who have been contacted were tracked with regard to their 'active/non-active' status. The process is repeated for every semester, and it is indeed gratifying to note that calling learners personally made a huge difference to the success rate, about 8-15% of them re-registered after the intervention.

The findings obtained from the call centre revealed that the most frequently stated life circumstances that influenced learners' decisions not to return were a) work related reasons, b) financial reasons, c) time management, d) family reasons and e) quality of services. Many of these learners found that demands on their energy, personal finances, and time competed with their studies. When faced with these competing demands, many of them opted to defer or quit their studies. However it is very heartening to note that learners who stated that their present life circumstances prevented them from returning indicated that they do plan to continue their studies in OUM until completion. Yet, there are also those who are adamant on leaving; and usually these learners have already made up their minds and would refuse any advice or suggestions.

Institutional Capacity Building

No matter how many innovations have been introduced, its effectiveness is a function of how effective is the staff of the university. Thus, OUM places great importance in the capacity building of its academic (full time and part time), administrative and support staff.

Due to their nature, many open universities operate with a small number of staff that must cater to tens of thousands of students. This is also the case for OUM, with about 500 full-time staff and 38,000 active learners. Staff, both administrative and academic, often has to multi-task to meet the needs of their jobs and the learners as well. As such, capacity building for its human resources is an important agenda to ascertain that the university is run smoothly and efficiently.

a) Academic staff

OUM's academic staff have to juggle administrative and academic demands. At the same time, OUM also encourages the academics to participate in research projects and conferences; using them as platforms to promote OUM further and as a means of enhancing the cachet of the university. Thus, the academics are given training in areas that concern research, publishing their findings in reputable journals as well as the writing and moderation of learning materials for the university.

b) Support staff

The support staff are mainly involved in the day-to-day operations of the university – from dealing with candidates and existing learners to co-ordinating programmes and examinations as well as providing general reinforcement in running OUM. Thus, OUM realises the need to continuously enhance the capacities of these staff by providing them with the opportunity to attend regular training sessions and workshops designed to improve relevant skills in communication, problem-solving, customer relations, administration and management.

c) Tutors

Though not employed on a full-time basis, tutors are an integral part of OUM. There are 9,000 tutors in the current pool, with about 4,000 who are active during each semester. The capacity building for OUM tutors is managed wholly by a designated centre that organises, co-ordinates and manages activities such as preparatory and training workshops, dialogues and colloquia to promote communication between the tutors and the management of the university. One of the agenda that has been successfully implemented in 2009 is the organisation of the national colloquium for tutors. Regional colloquia will now be arranged to encourage further interaction, identify and resolve grievances as well as share ideas and experiences to improve services for both the tutors and the university.

The Way Forward and Concluding Remarks

We at OUM believe that moving forward requires keeping an open mind, constantly searching for new ways to do things, readily acknowledging problems and quickly rectifying them to ensure that the best services are rendered to the learners and for the good interest of the university as a whole.

As we set our sights on the future, OUM will continue to perform regular audits and yearly surveys to identify additional key areas that need to be addressed. Priority-satisfaction surveys and tracer studies will be conducted at regular intervals, and the corresponding results will be analysed to zero in on important issues and challenges that may hinder the effective and efficient running of the university. Consequently, we will also be looking into the possible solutions for all challenges that may surface.

By adopting new methods and technologies, fostering continuous interaction between all university stakeholders and keeping abreast with current developments in ODL, we will hopefully be able to further boost the effectiveness and efficiency of OUM.

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