

# **Towards Excellence in Higher Education –The Experience of Open University Malaysia (OUM)**

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*Sub Themes: Educational Technology in ODL*

## *Abstract*

*With the advancement in communication technology via the Internet and World Wide Web, attention has been drawn to Open Distance Learning (ODL) as an alternative mode for teaching and learning. In Malaysia, OUM is well acknowledged as the pioneer for ODL education. OUM has placed great effort in leveraging ICT aimed at making higher education more accessible and affordable across the country. This paper will discuss how OUM has contributed towards the democratisation of higher education in Malaysia. The paper will also examine OUM's delivery of online teaching and learning using the My Virtual Learning Environment (MyVLE).*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Malaysian higher education has been facing fundamental changes triggered by the effects of globalization, and the speed of change in the growth of communication technologies. Indeed, the developments in information and communication technologies have been exponential to the extent that they have enabled people to transcend space with ease. Higher education as a consequence, has also been caught up in this quagmire of globalization and has moved from a peripheral to a central position in response to the government's reaction to absorb new technology and compete in the free world. In fact Scott in his book *The Globalization of Higher Education* has described the radical processes of globalization as implicating higher education as the creator, interpreter and sufferer of such trends (Scott, 1998). Particularly in Malaysia, economics and politics have made their impact felt on the way education has progressed in line with the shift towards productivity and growth based upon knowledge and innovation. For instance, the national gross expenditure on research and development (GERD) grew from RM1.1 billion to RM4.3 billion in 2005. Within the same period, the use of ICT grew from 1.2% to 21.8%. (Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010). The observation from these trends indicates the increasing demand for knowledge-based input in practically all aspects of life. Ultimately the onus is on universities which are expected to respond to the demands from the labour market for highly qualified and know-how graduates.

## **1.1 Positioning Higher Education in Malaysia**

Malaysia's strides in nation building during the Ninth Malaysia Plan have been propelled according to the five thrusts of the National Mission. Where higher education is concerned, the impetus is given in the second thrust where the emphasis is on improving access to quality education, nurturing research and development as well as increasing the application of technology and ICT to education (Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2010). It was during the Eighth Malaysia Plan 2001-2005 that human capital was recognized as the most crucial element in nation building. It was within this context that education, training and acquisition of skills and knowledge became critical values to be internalized by the people. Subsequent government policies also gave emphasis to a knowledge-based economy such as those set out in the Third Outline Perspective Plan (Malaysia, 2001). This perspective plan reiterated the necessity of manpower based on knowledge, the promotion of life-long learning and human capital development via schools, colleges, institutions of higher learning and universities. Indeed, it was this drive towards a quality labour force in the country that culminated in thrust two of the Ninth Malaysia Plan. With globalization and the eclipse of country boundaries or aptly referred to as the borderless world (Ohmae, 1999, 2005), there is a general shift in the global economy to open competition and free trade amongst nations.

## **1.2 Role of Open Universities**

Since lifelong learning had been implemented and was to be accelerated, it meant promoting e-learning and open and distance education to increase accessibility. Simultaneously, the government encouraged people to enrol for higher education via steps that included flexible entry requirements; and placing fewer restrictions on public and private educational institutions; and offering more places to students that met the minimum requirement. In addition the government set up a National Council for Lifelong Learning which provided the platform for policy directions and coordination facilities. This action encouraged the formation of open universities such as the Open University Malaysia to offer more programmes at all levels from diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate to cater to the demands for a university degree, especially from working people. It must be emphasized that the Open University Malaysia became the beacon for this concept of open and distance learning for the country when it began providing education to working adults by utilizing the latest technology in the network of computers compatible with e-learning and e-teaching.

The path towards excellence in higher education in Malaysia coincided with the reforms undertaken by the civil service which was "re-inventing" itself during the early 1990s. There was a conscious shift towards a knowledge-based economy because the country had to be competitive and sustainable in line with the global trend of open trade and economy practiced by many other countries. If Malaysia is to achieve economic growth it has little choice but to leverage on a workforce that is educated and skilled. In order to have a knowledgeable population, the infrastructure and right facilities need to be in place inclusive of adequate changes to the education structure and policies. This places

emphasis on technology; basically focusing upon ICT, broadband networks, Internet and an e-government with linkages to the global information highway. The overarching goal is the Vision 2020 which stipulates a prepared workforce with advanced literacy levels that can support increasing productivity and continued economic development (Chong, 2003). Inherent to the emergence of a knowledge economy and ensuring the continuation of a skilled workforce, changes to the structure and policies of education are obviously required and need to be carried out constantly. Ultimately, to allow as many people as possible and anywhere to gain access to higher education, especially working adults, the role of the Open University became prominent.

In Malaysia, the Open University Malaysia was set up and based its teaching and learning methods on modern technologies and blended pedagogy. However, it is recognized that higher education has to be continuously improved upon due to persistent influence from global trends and its inter-links to society as a whole. Within this context, it is noteworthy to relate the role of Open University Malaysia and how it has steered tertiary education in Malaysia.

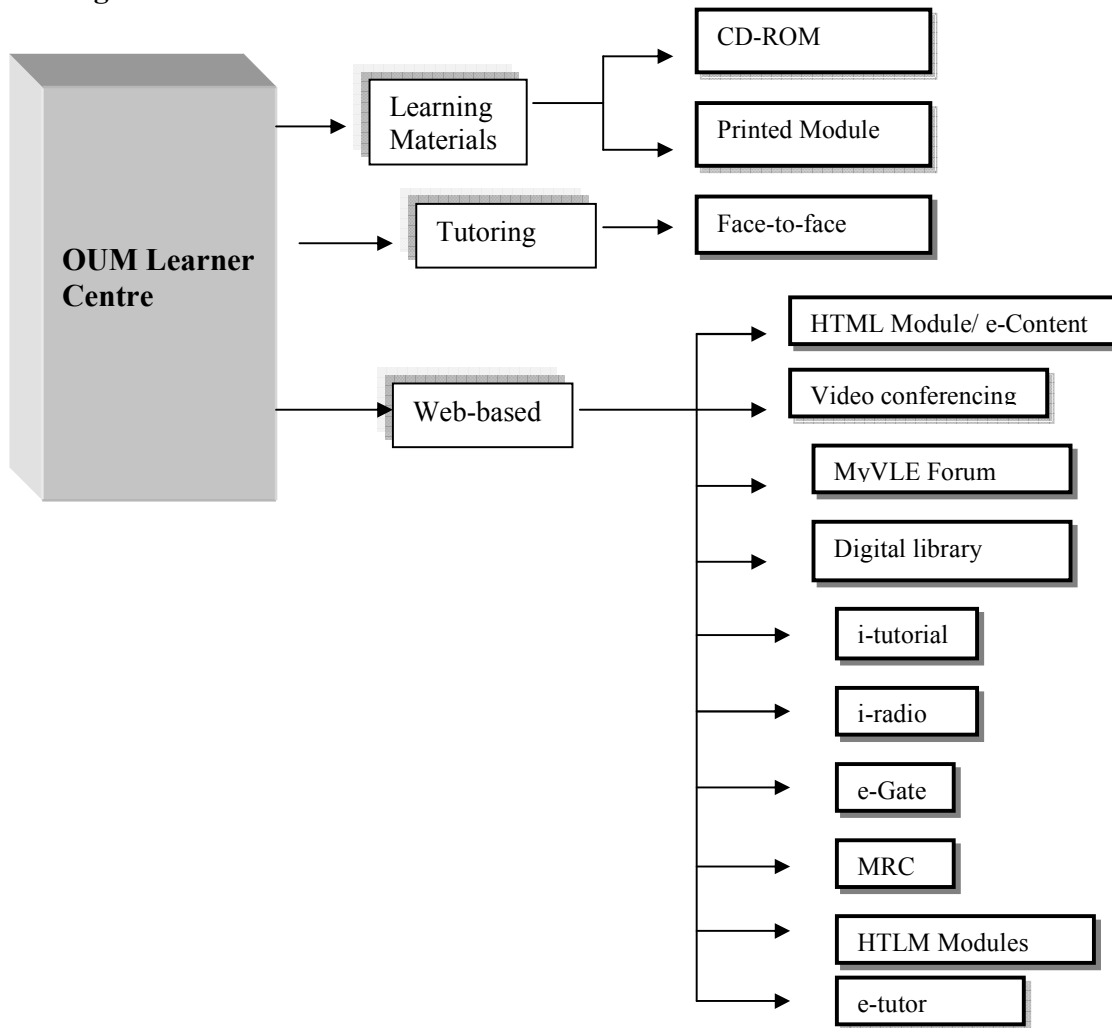
## **2.0 Open University Malaysia (OUM)**

This country is at a defining moment where education is concerned; primarily higher education. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the time of knowledge workers; upon which the foundations of a nation's growth and wealth are derived from, and less from natural and physical resources (Nair, 2003). This transformation requires changing the process of how education is managed and transmitted involving a combination of technology and people; in other words people who learn and apply knowledge; and using e-technology as a means of transmission. The advancement of Internet technology and its easy access have aided learning and teaching to become flexible, open and global. Today, gaining an education through various modes such as the Internet, e-learning, open distance learning has become increasingly popular and practical. Certainly, those institutions of higher education that offer learning and teaching using these methods have become attractive. The enrolment of students at such institutions has increased and will continue in tandem with the rapid growth of ICT and the quest for a degree.

For the Open University Malaysia (OUM), it was established based entirely on this concept of providing higher education using the latest Internet technology thereby allowing access to education for all. Indeed, OUM is the first ODL (Open Distance Learning) institution in Malaysia set up in 2000 to fulfil the nation's aspiration to increase education opportunities for the people especially the working adults. Through the years, ICT and ODL (UNESCO, 2002) have become synonymous with the way OUM operates its programs; indeed Internet technology has increasingly become an inseparable component of learning and delivering of educational materials for OUM's students (Abu Zarin, et al, 2008). Based on a policy of blended pedagogy, this allows for limited sessions of face-to-face tutorials with printed learning materials as inputs alongside online coaching and forum discussions. In other words, OUM's pedagogy is premised on self-managed learning (80%), face-to-face interaction (8%) and online learning (12%) (Abas, Z.W. et al, 2008). While e-learning allows for flexible, self-paced learning, it requires much discipline and perseverance and from experience, OUM has observed that

this only strengthens a student's will-power to succeed and to achieve future advancement in his career. Certainly, this makes learning via OUM's methods a dualistic achievement – obtaining a degree (knowledge) and character building. The OUM has over the years developed and fine-tuned its web-education taking advantage of the rapid technological advances occurring globally. This can be referred to in Figure 1 where OUM's current ODL model shows how this university is carrying out its programmes for higher education.

**Figure 1: Current ODL Model of OUM**



As an ODL university, OUM has developed a unique system for teaching and learning online. This system enables learners and tutors to interact online where courses and discussions are delivered and carried out digitally. This type of e-learning management system is aptly called My Virtual Learning Environment (MyVLE). OUM's MyVLE allows the integration of various features such as instructor and students' tools, technical support, administrative tools and functions thereby facilitating the teaching and learning process (OUM, 2005). Certainly, this method has given credence to digital education

where it is now possible to learn outside the classroom and importantly interact with their peers online. This is the asynchronous feature which is so significant for OUM's MyVLE approach in engaging both learners and tutors in an environment that permits the transmission and interaction of course materials between different parties who are at various locations. Indeed, this concept of "no classroom boundaries for learning" via digital education also contributes to empowerment of learners who are dispersed geographically yet at the same time can self manage their learning according to their own schedule. Indeed, this innovative practice of OUM gives meaning to democratization of education which is also one of the objectives for the setting up of this university in Malaysia.

From the model, it can be seen that while MyVLE is certainly the innovative feature of OUM's ODL and most frequently utilized, the university has in place other web based methods. These include a library that is fully digital and easily accessed from various destinations in the world, thereby serving the research needs of many of the post graduate learners who may not reside in Kuala Lumpur where the university is located.

Video conferencing is a common mode of correspondence and communication and without exception this technology has become an integrated part of the operations of the OUM. Oral examination or *viva-voce* for the OUM's PhD candidates from other countries using video conferencing has made it unnecessary for students to travel to OUM in Malaysia for the oral defence of their dissertations. On the contrary, i-tutorial appears to be infrequently used, perhaps, due to the popularity and easy accessibility of other modes of learning available. The underlying concept for the university is that learners have a choice to select the most cost-effective system which allows them flexibility for learning interaction, whether through the web-based, and/or multi-media modes together with printed modules. As the OUM works in maintaining quality education and increasing excellence in higher education, it is conscious of the continuous competition from other ODL institutions within Malaysia and globally that also seek to offer the same opportunities to a similar pool of potential clients.

## **2.1 Challenges to Higher Education**

Over the last few years, indications are that the demand for higher education will continue to grow in Malaysia in tandem with the government's emphasis on human capital development. The figures in Table 1 are indicative of an increasing trend in student enrolment in both private and public institutions for higher education. In a matter of six years (2002 to 2008), there was a significant increase in tertiary enrolment of about 54.4% and 35.7% for the public and private sectors respectively.

**Table 1: Tertiary Student Enrolment in Malaysia – Public and Private**

Table 1: Tertiary student enrolment

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008+
Public*	337,944	354,275	367,305	390,828	424,343	481,685	521,696
Private	294,600	314,344	322,891	258,825	323,787	365,800	399,852

+ As at Aug 10

\* Including universities, polytechnics and community colleges

Source: Ministry of Higher Education (<http://www.mohe.gov.my>)

While the government through the traditional public universities has thus far been the main players, there is realization and acknowledgement that the private sector has a responsibility in complementing and supplementing the government's role in higher education in the country. According to the Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (MAPCU), the higher education institutions in the private sector cater to at least 450,000 students in 2008 and are contributing significantly to the nation's growth. However, in fulfilling their part, private universities will have to anticipate challenges that will automatically accompany growth in higher education from within and outside the country. This is especially critical for OUM which was the first ODL university to be set up in this country and due to the increasing numbers of similar universities being established, will face even more intense competition in the future. In this respect, OUM has to take heed of these challenges to its propensity to expand and its ability to take advantage of opportunity costs – in other words, the significance of the “blue ocean” strategy may contribute to OUM's innovation and vision for higher education in the future. In brief, the “blue ocean” is supposed to be an uncontested market and the strategy of the blue ocean strategy (BOS) is basically to compete in it. BOS highlights the importance of strategic planning, ‘thinking out of the box’ and for management to be visionary (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005).

As the OUM begins to face stiff competition in the education market, it necessitates a paradigm shift in the organization's philosophy and business management to meet the rising challenges in education from within and globally. Towards this objective, the Corporate Planning Unit of the OUM has encouraged the staff to be innovative and visionary (based on the blue ocean principle) in anticipation of obstacles that might impede the growth and development of the university in the future.

### **3.0 Conclusion**

Higher education trend whether in Malaysia or elsewhere will be a continuous process of growth and development. Certainly, restructuring and reforms will be undertaken bearing in mind the challenges that will always be present due to changes caused by effects of technology, politics, economy, demography and market opportunities. In addition, the government is continuously encouraging lifelong learning programmes, providing access to quality education, and expanding the number of institutions of higher learning. The ultimate aim is to ensure that the country will have a human capital that is resilient,

skilled and knowledge driven that can be depended upon to provide the impetus for the nation's continual development and growth. OUM may need to re-examine and thence restructure some of its policies bearing in mind the significance of the "blue ocean" strategy. For instance, OUM may consider improving on the existing MyVLE, researching into the design and development of a more user-friendly and comprehensive learning system. Such a system should be multi-faceted and highly interactive. The system should integrate all existing learning objects under one platform, but organised in a way that it guides learners in their exploratory learning process. Creating such an integrated system via an all-in-one interface will allow accessibility to learners' demands which is not available with this present mode. The current system appears to be a "non-integrated model" that does not allow learners to communicate and visualize through a "unified whole model". The suggestion of having an integrated model system, for example, can be the visionary policy of OUM that may provide the springboard for this University to leap into the future as the undisputed leader of ODL education. Ideally, the result will ensure OUM stand tall as a provider of higher education via ODL with the ability to narrow the digital divide in education.

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