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**Global Outreach in Open and Distance Learning:
The Internationalisation of Open University Malaysia**

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Abstract

The very foundation of open and distance learning (ODL) has been intrinsically linked to the creation of broader access and better opportunities in higher education. In the last several decades since the internet revolution, ODL has made tremendous strides in granting an unprecedented number of people with the opportunity to obtain a university degree. This new phenomenon has created a learning community that can interact, share and collaborate outside traditional notions of time and space; thus, helping to create and strengthen global competencies for a world that places ever greater esteem on the attainment of higher education.

Central to this effort to build a global learning community is the move towards cross-border provision and internationalisation. The open and borderless nature of ODL means that open universities are free to explore internationalisation as a means to expand their operations by offering academic programmes overseas. For Malaysia's premier ODL institution, Open University Malaysia (OUM) takes its internationalisation efforts seriously. With a delivery system and various e-learning initiatives designed to provide ease and flexibility through ODL, OUM has been able to stamp its mark as a viable educational provider in several countries such as Yemen, Bahrain, the Maldives and Ghana. OUM has also recently launched a collaboration with an educational institution in Hungary.

The university has certainly come a long way since its strategic partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia for the establishment of their National e-Learning Centre (NeLC) in Riyadh four years ago. Through these endeavours, OUM hopes to play a key role as Malaysia forges ahead in its drive towards a global educational excellence. This paper will illustrate OUM's internationalisation efforts and examine the factors that have been vital in the success of this international outreach. This paper will also explore the various facets of ODL in reaching out to a global community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation is a phenomenon that has progressed in concert with the impact of globalisation, not only in higher education, but in virtually all other fields as well. A universal concern for all countries is to build national capacities that can respond to the new pace of a globalised, borderless world; capacities that of course concern higher education. Correspondingly, higher education has been pulled into that same dynamic current where technologies, people, values and ideas can flow from one extreme of the planet to the other. Various political, economic and social forces have also transformed higher education from a traditional, exclusive and centrally-controlled field to a more accessible, open, autonomous, and in some cases, privatised industry. With globalisation, there has been a great opening of doors for new, non-traditional learners to step into the world of university education. For higher education institutions, this transformation presents an opportunity to dabble in internationalisation as a way to further expand themselves.

Commonly, internationalisation of higher education is manifest in cross-border activities that include the mobility of programmes, learners, faculty staff and researchers from one country to another. Much of the international operations have been encouraged by advances in technologies, the growth in demand for university education, the acceptance of education as a tradable service as well as a new belief that education should be more democratised. Many higher education institutions have also begun to accept that internationalisation is a means to claim a stake in the global education market and help to steer their own countries into greater repute at the global level. With the enforcement of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), education as a whole and higher education in particular have certainly become more tradable, and this has helped to shape a new attitude towards the role of universities as key stakeholders in national competitiveness and capacity building, as well as a new understanding of education as an export commodity

that can be exploited to brand a country's knowledge prowess (International Council for Open and Distance Education, 2009).

The internationalisation of higher education, and the transformation process that has helped to lay its foundations, affects virtually every country. Many developing ones, like Malaysia and Indonesia, have become consumer countries, whilst developed, English-speaking countries are generally considered the largest providers of international educational services. From a broad perspective, this trend has resulted in greater student mobility from Asia-Pacific, middle-income backgrounds into American, Australian and British universities, as well as the establishment of branch campuses and franchise arrangements within the developing countries. For the former, this rings true mainly for traditional on-campus universities, as the prestige of European and American higher education remains a powerful "pull" factor for students coming from less developed, post-colonial backgrounds (Kell & Vogl, 2010). Having said that, one feature in this internationalisation process that cannot be ignored is the continued growth of open and distance learning (ODL). ODL has grown significantly within recent years, and is today clearly acknowledged as an important player in international higher education provision; something that has been greatly aided by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

For Malaysia specifically, the transformation of higher education is an important national step towards a knowledge-based economy, human capital development as well as the branding of Malaysian higher education as competitive and of high quality. While this transformation process has been ongoing since the 1990s, the move towards the abovementioned goals will always be a relevant exercise and internationalisation will likely prove to be a critical element in their achievement. The government's drive towards making Malaysia a centre for educational excellence in this region can be significantly attributed to the nation's ability to attract foreign students from Asian developing countries, like Indonesia, and the Middle East. In fact, almost 10,000 Indonesians were already enrolled in 2009; representing more than 10 per cent of all foreign students in Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Various strategies have been initiated to support this drive, e.g. a wide range of cost-effective study options, implementing stringent quality assurance policies, as well as allowing foreign universities to set up branch campuses in Malaysia.

Open University Malaysia (OUM), the country's premier ODL institution, will hope to play a key role in this effort, and we believe that ODL presents the means to make Malaysian higher education a viable option in the international arena. By partnering with well-established educational institutions abroad, OUM has been able to offer, conduct and deliver programmes on foreign soil. This has resulted in the establishment of several learning centres located outside Malaysia, allowing OUM to develop an international presence that will hopefully pave the way to making OUM a recognised ODL provider has been made possible by an affordable and flexible delivery system that has been reinforced with various innovations in ICT and e-learning.

This paper will explore the various features of internationalisation in higher education; describe OUM's internationalisation strategies and enabling factors that have allowed the university to reach out to a global audience. The internationalisation of ODL can have a positive impact on Malaysian higher education at large, as the Government aims to position Malaysia as a centre for educational excellence in the Asian region. For OUM specifically, internationalisation is seen as an opportunity for growth, expansion and most importantly, for upholding the very mission of ODL to make higher education accessible to anyone who seeks it, as reflected in our motto "University for All".

2. GLOBALISATION AND THE RAPID EXPANSION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The rapid expansion and transformation of higher education within the last three decades relate to various social, economic and political changes worldwide. The dynamics involved in the global economic environment, the increasing impact of globalisation on the way we live and do business as well as local conditions in individual countries have all contributed to the significant reforms and changes that have taken place. With many countries realising the need to develop their human capital in the drive towards creating a knowledge-based economy, there has been an increasing demand for places in universities and a gaining importance of tertiary education in the national agenda.

The reform of higher education has involved ODL as a novel approach towards creating greater access to higher education. This has resulted in increased enrolment as well as opportunities for both traditional (i.e. school-leavers) and non-traditional students to obtain university degrees. At the same time, we find that today's learners are "digital natives" (The Economist, 2008; Magaña & Frenkel, 2009), i.e. individuals who have grown up in an era where technological tools and applications are universal and ubiquitous. There also others who have a new vested interest in higher and continuing education, e.g. working adults, senior citizens, members of the arm forces, in-service teachers and many others whose educational attainment is now recognised as integral to a country's economic well-being. For these non-traditional learners, ODL can be a blessing, for this is the approach that can give them unprecedented opportunity in gaining a university education without having to leave their day jobs.

The flexibility in delivery and learning processes are significant contributors to the success of ODL and open universities. The leverage of ICTs is also a mainstay that has been able to reach the masses and enrich the learning experiences of the ODL students. ODL is indeed a revolutionary approach that has evolved with the premise of creating more opportunities for people to gain knowledge that will be vital for the competitive world we live in today. In Indonesia, the role of Universitas Terbuka (UT) in enhancing tertiary education through ODL is one that cannot be overlooked. Since 1984, UT has been a significant player in the Indonesian higher education scene, and has cumulatively enrolled more than 1.5 million students and produced about a million graduates. In its most recent semester, there were almost 650,000 active UT students (UT, 2010). Like OUM, UT also caters to working adults, and has spent a considerable amount of time and energy developing study materials and assessment systems as well as refining regulation and quality assurance. For an extensive archipelago like Indonesia, ODL has clearly had such a massive impact through an institution like UT.

ODL centres on the idea that education should be open, accessible, flexible and equitable to anyone who seeks it. The very conception of distance learning was founded on the growing need for skills upgrading and retraining as well as the technologies that make it possible to teach and learn at a distance (Daniel, 2002). In higher education, this means that there is a new way to provide and disseminate knowledge, particularly to working adults. As learners, they generally study on a part-time basis while juggling

multiple personal and professional commitments and are inclined towards higher and continuing education for reasons that usually relate to career advancement.

As such, ODL programmes tend to gravitate toward career-oriented or industry-driven fields, e.g. business administration, information technology, education, occupational health and safety and nursing science. Many ODL institutions also employ a blended or hybrid pedagogy; allowing learners to attend a minimal number of classes while doing most of their studying independently via an online platform, audio- and/or videocassettes, broadcasted television/radio programmes or other multimedia. This flexible learning arrangement is probably the most prominent reason why ODL is an attractive mode of learning for working adults. That being said, this does not mean that quality is compromised in an ODL setting. In fact, the challenge for ODL institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia, for instance, is to encompass “quality education” in all facets of delivery, including course content, assessment, support services (such as the learning management system), regulation and accreditation. What is clearly evident is that many ODL institutions, including UT and OUM, do emphasise on quality-related issues. With globalisation, ODL institutions today are more accountable, especially at the international level, thus, the need to ensure quality has become even more pressing.

The rapid expansion of open universities is also attributable to ODL’s flexibility – an advantage that comes from the adoption of appropriate ICTs. In recent years, this can be seen in such developments as learning and content management systems, multimedia-rich course materials, virtual libraries and the use of collaborative tools like the Wiki. Other contemporary developments also include the use of mobile technology, Web 2.0 applications and social networking platforms and artificial intelligence to complement instructional design and learning technologies. These innovations have enormous implications on the delivery of programmes in ODL institutions, and it is also through ICTs that they are able to reach more learners within local settings and even beyond national borders.

Based on these strengths, ODL institutions have become major players in the internationalisation of higher education; many are already involved in collaborative partnerships, even with institutions and countries that are located in faraway continents. For instance, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) from India has been

known to deliver programmes into Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha, Kuwait, Oman, the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Vietnam, Myanmar and Singapore (Jung, 2007). Even a relatively young institution like OUM has formed partnerships with local institutions in Bahrain, Ghana, Hungary, Indonesia, the Maldives, India, Sri Lanka and Yemen. With the involvement of ODL and open universities in internationalisation, the learning audience has indeed become more global, and it will be a misfortune for anyone or any institution to be left out.

3. INTERNATIONALISATION: OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA'S GLOBAL OUTREACH

OUM started with a first intake of only 753 learners in August 2001. A decade later, the cumulative intake has reached over 96,000 and the total number of graduates has surpassed 30,000. These are landmarks that we are exceedingly proud of. As Malaysia's first open university, OUM can be considered to be relatively new but in a short span of time, we have come close to reaching the mega university status and have been able to stamp our mark throughout the country. Our further growth and expansion lies not only within Malaysia, but we believe that there is much to gain and learn from internationalisation.

OUM's global outreach has been an ongoing exploration for the past several years. We are constantly looking for new partners who share our educational mission as well as searching for ways to improve upon existing partnerships. Our main clientele, both locally and overseas, comprises working adults and part-time learners. Most of the other Malaysian private universities cater to full-time first-degree students. The international enrolment for these other private universities thus involves foreign students to live and study in Malaysia for the duration of their programmes. In view of this distinct variation, OUM has devised its internationalisation efforts in a different way, i.e. by locating all activities overseas.

Over the past six years or so, OUM has forged partnerships with numerous foreign educational institutions. Some of our partnerships have been with:

- Arab Open University (AOU), Bahrain;
- University of Science and Technology (USTY), Yemen;
- Villa College, the Maldives;
- Accra Institute of Technology (AIT), Ghana;
- Trent Global Educational Group, Singapore; and
- International Institute of Health Sciences (IIHS), Sri Lanka.

With the exception of the OUM-IIHS collaboration that focuses only the Bachelor of Nursing Science degree, the others offer on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, mainly in the fields of Business Administration and Information Technology. In general, all these partnerships allow the foreign institution to operate as an overseas learning centre of OUM. Whilst these foreign institutions are able to enrol learners, conduct all its teaching and learning activities independently, OUM is responsible for providing learning materials, setting examination questions, endorsing marking schemes, examination results and teaching staff as well. This arrangement has proven to be feasible for both parties as OUM does not interfere with regular day-to-day operations at these institutions, providing them with sufficient autonomy whilst still ensuring quality by monitoring and endorsing the relevant processes. OUM also gives technological support, mostly in the form of subscription to OUM's learning management system (known as myVLE) as well as the provision of learning materials and e-content.

The collaborations are based on mutual benefits, where, apart from the offering of academic programmes, both parties gain from:

- The sharing of ICT facilities;
- Cooperation in curriculum development;
- The training and exchange of academic staff;
- Collaboration in research activities and publications; and
- The sharing of learning materials and support services.

To date, OUM has enrolled almost 1,600 international learners who are located in Sana'a, Manama, Malé, Accra, Singapore and Colombo, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1: Cumulative Intakes of OUM International Learners

Partnering Institution	Cumulative Intake*
University of Science and Technology, Yemen	487
Arab Open University, Bahrain	430
Villa College, The Maldives	482
Accra Institute of Technology, Ghana	165
Trent Global Educational Group, Singapore	9
International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka	5
Total Cumulative Intake	1,578

**All figures as at November 2010*

Within the last two years, OUM has also forged new partnerships with IIHS in Sri Lanka and Eszterházy Károly College in Eger, Hungary. The latter is our newest partner, and will begin offering OUM's postgraduate programmes in 2011.

Through its unique partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), OUM has helped to establish KSA's National e-Learning Centre (NeLC) in Riyadh. NeLC was successfully launched in 2006. With technical support provided by its sister company, METEOR Technology and Consultancy Sdn Bhd, OUM has provided NeLC with the technological know-how to embark on the Kingdom's very own e-learning initiative through the training of faculty members and IT staff as well as the development of courses utilising e-content. NeLC even uses OUM's learning management system (now known as myVLE) as its e-learning portal. myVLE acts as their main reference point for all teaching and learning activities, as well as enabling them to interact with peers, tutors and their respective institutions.

Another good example of OUM's global outreach is with a well-known multinational in initiating the Executive Diploma in Manufacturing Management (EDDM) programme in 2006 with Nestlé. The design of this 20-month long programme is based on the research and analysis of the required job functions of First Line Managers in Nestlé factories in Malaysia, aiming at delivering specific workplace competencies. This programme is developed by OUM's subject-matter-experts (SMEs) in full collaboration with expertise from the industry, particularly the senior staff of Nestlé Malaysia. It is through this close collaboration and meticulous development of the curriculum that the

partnership between OUM and Nestlé has significantly benefited the Nestlé staff enrolled in this programme. It is hoped that a similar programme can be adopted in other Nestlé factories worldwide when the e-learning component has been fully developed and tested. If this project materialises, we believe that this will be a significant milestone for OUM in the embarking on an international training programme which leverages on e-learning to suit the needs of a dynamic multinational organisation which requires new competencies amongst its workforce.

Apart from academic programmes offered through our institutional partners overseas, mention must also be made about our collaborative initiatives in three areas, i.e.:

- Joint offering of a postgraduate programme, i.e. Master's in ASEAN Studies:
This is a collaboration between OUM and UT (Indonesia), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU, the Philippines), Hanoi Open University (HOU, Vietnam) and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU, Thailand) to be launched in October 2011;
- The ASEAN Journal of Open and Distance Learning:
Jointly produced by OUM, STOU and UPOU; and
- Joint research on learner retention:
A research project by OUM and STOU that sought to examine learner retention in first degree programmes (initiated in 2009).

4. OUM'S ENABLING FACTORS

For any educational institution, successfully building a global presence requires many things both tangible and subjective, e.g. diplomacy, careful planning, implementation of a concrete business model, understanding of local cultures, as well as building a strong rapport with the partnering institution. What must be kept in mind is that any international outreach programme, like its domestic counterpart, must aim to achieve the same missions and uphold the same values.

Leveraging on past experiences and formulating best practices from them has indeed proven to be an integral and important factor for OUM. Both institutions must work

together from the very start to develop a matrix of responsibilities that details each of their respective roles in the offering of OUM's academic programmes. This is critical to ensure that all processes are executed properly according to set rubrics as well as to minimise any misunderstanding during the execution of OUM programmes.

It is also important to establish a workable and positive relationship. An important learning process for OUM is to understand the culture and work ethics of a prospective partner – something that must occur during early negotiations. It is only through such understanding that we are able to sustain the negotiations, thus paving the way for a successful partnership. This is indeed a significant component of any relationship which is built to last, strengthened further with the commitment of the chief executives of both partners. This understanding and close relationship between them will definitely be translated down to every level, including the Deans and faculty members.

One must remember that such a relationship is needed to create an environment that is conducive for the staff of both partners to work together and ensure a sustainable collaboration. With a sustainable relationship, both partners can ascertain that the learners' interests will remain the cornerstone of the partnership. Following OUM's operations since its establishment, an important guiding principle for us is that we remain learner-focused or centred. At the same time, government support for both partnering institutions is also pertinent so that both will feel the comfort of such support, thus paving the way for a better collaborative environment between the two partners.

Cost is another crucial factor to ensure success in this partnership. In order to present OUM's academic programmes as an attractive and competitive option, it is necessary that the corresponding tuition fees are attractive and competitive as well. It would be vital to note the economic standing and living cost of any foreign country to ascertain that the tuition fees are affordable and within the means of the target market in that country. As an education provider that thrives on its motto of "University for All", OUM is obligated to make its programmes affordable to all its learners, whether they are local or otherwise.

An important point to note is that OUM has not increased its fees since its first intake in 2001. The university's management is of the view that this strategy should be a critical

initiative which creates greater awareness for lifelong learning, especially amongst the working population. Retaining its tuition fees within affordable means is part of OUM's corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR is an important component for the university. While it is a necessary challenge for many organisations, CSR represents an opportunity for OUM to give back to society. As an educational institution, OUM's CSR concept involves the provision of affordable tuition fees, easy payment schemes, loans, bursaries, scholarships as well as incentives for certain groups, e.g. senior citizens and the physically disabled.

As part of its quality assurance (QA) measure, OUM also conducts yearly audits on site at each of its overseas learning centre. Such QA audits, performed by OUM's faculty members, will involve the inspection of various operations and review of the relevant documents, e.g. learner files, assessment questions, answer scripts and files of the teaching staff. This has been an essential exercise that allows OUM and its international partner to evaluate the progress of the collaboration, identify problems, and troubleshoot where necessary. Consequently, constant communication and consultation is also an important point in ensuring a successful collaboration. Due to the fact that these learning centres are located abroad, OUM and its partnering institution must be in contact with each other at all times not merely to keep the communication lines open, but also to iron out issues together.

OUM's learning management system, myVLE, and its e-learning system have also been a central contributing factor for international partnerships. Having been adopted by several public and private universities in Malaysia, OUM has been able to capitalise on its experience and in-house expertise to market the system internationally – most of our international partners fully adopt myVLE as their learning management system. Each myVLE portal utilised in these different institutions consists of similar functions used at OUM, with an integrated system that has been developed to provide ease-of-use to the learners. Through myVLE, OUM learners are also able to access the university's collections in the Digital Library, regardless of where they may be or which institution they are enrolled into. This applies to all learners, including those located overseas. The continuous development of myVLE is a relentless focus at OUM; and this is perhaps also one of our strongest leverages in the international scene.

The success of this international outreach must be attributed to the reputation of the partnering institution as well. OUM has been fortunate to have collaborated with institutions of excellent standing which share the university's goals and are able to synergise with OUM to provide the best possible services to these international learners. That said, sustaining such a collaboration is a continuous effort and thus requires both institutions to work together throughout the entire duration of the partnership.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The cultivation of a global learning audience is a novel phenomenon and has been greatly aided by ODL. By its very nature, ODL practitioners are capable of venturing into internationalisation as a means for institutional progress as well as to market their programmes and services to this global audience. For now and the near future, internationalisation will continue to be a significant element in higher education, as long as human capital development and knowledge prowess remain important foci for many nations and the world community at large.

OUM's international outreach in the past six years has resulted in the establishment of several learning centres located abroad and an enrolment of almost 1,600 learners thus far – an achievement that we consider unique as not many other Malaysian higher education institutions have ventured into internationalisation via this approach. The university hopes to continue to enhance this outreach by forging new collaborations with other institutions in different regions and progressively build an international presence of reputable standing, thus elevating OUM and Malaysia to greater heights in the provision of educational services.

OUM anticipates that this international outreach will continue to be a fundamental component in the national transformation process. By establishing itself as a leading educational provider on foreign soil, OUM hopes to continue to be a key player as Malaysia gears itself towards being a centre of educational excellence. We have indeed been fortunate to have forged partnerships with foreign institutions that share our educational ideals, and we believe that other institutions will also be able to achieve similar success.

For any higher education institution, exploring internationalisation as a means for expansion will be a positive move that can also contribute to the creation of a global learning audience. The world of today allows for many things – from students, programmes and curricula – to be traded across borders; and those that remain hesitant may run the risk of being left behind. If anything, the open and flexible nature of ODL should provide the boost needed for this endeavour.

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