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**BUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH ICT: BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE USING ONLINE LEARNING**

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**ASSALAMUALAIKUM WARAHMATULLAHI WABARAKATUH DAN SALAM SEJAHTERA**

First and foremost, allow me to thank the organisers for inviting me to deliver the official opening address in this international workshop with the theme "Building Learning Communities through ICT: Bridging the Digital Divide using Online Learning."

At the outset, let us examine the theme and try to define certain parameters such that we can draw some useful pointers that would be helpful for us as participants.

Building learning communities implies the empowerment of individuals in the community through education and provisions of the necessary support.

ICT or information and communication technology refers to the utilization of appropriate technologies for information and communication.

Digital divide refers to inequitable access to information.

Online learning refers to learning using new multimedia technologies and the internet; and they represent a very innovative category or mode of communicating.

Having defined the components of the theme of the conference, let me now deliberate on why we need to build learning communities through ICT and why we need to bridge the digital divide using online learning. The developments in most developed nations such as New Zealand, the United States, Canada, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom and others suggest that open and distance education is reaching new heights. As an extension of distance learning, online teaching and learning has now become an important phenomenon in promoting lifelong learning. Online learning has undoubtedly expanded the possibilities of distance education; simultaneously reducing the dependence on print and traditional means of communication.

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Given these developments which may, in the absence of the right strategies, widen the digital divide between such developed countries and the developing countries like Malaysia.

The challenge for us becomes more daunting given the government's objective to establish Malaysia as the Centre for Educational Excellence. In a sense, we have no choice but to build learning communities which can be defined as societies in which learning throughout life is encouraged, and where organizations are constantly improving themselves by learning about themselves and others. "Benchmarking" and indeed adopting "best practices" from others are important ingredients that will promote excellence at all levels. To ensure that we can successfully build learning communities, we need to promote and nurture a society that is inquisitive and for ever seeking knowledge.

As educators, our goal is indeed to facilitate and impart to the students the capacities required to manage the rapidly expanded breadth and depth of knowledge which is currently available. I may venture to say that the focus of higher education is already shifting to the development of critical thinking and self-directed learning abilities that can serve the individual over a lifetime. I believe that online learning has moved into the mainstream of higher education; and it will certainly be an influential catalyst towards quality education in the future. The important implication is that the real value-add is the quality of the learning experience.

How do we go about achieving this? I am sure you would agree with me that the only way for this to happen is through the provision of education for all which as you all know, is also the theme chosen by UNESCO during the last few decades. I am proud to say that Open University Malaysia (OUM) has been propagating education for all to the Malaysian public since we started our enrolment in August 2001. In this regard, I believe I could share with you some of our experiences later.

If we were to develop learning communities, we need to provide education to as many members of the society. Thus, our biggest challenge today is how to provide education or more specifically a learning experience suited to the needs of our society. If we can do this effectively, we would be able to successfully build learning communities which will ensure a long-term social and economic development that is sustainable for our nation. The human resource needs of the country, given the rapidly changing economic scenario must be tuned to these changing needs and, equally important, the increasing number of our young population. Of course, Malaysia is not an exception in this regard. Most of the countries in this region are facing similar problems, and thus similar challenges for their governments and policy makers.

Today, to a certain degree, we are indeed fortunate that we are in the midst of the ICT revolution which readily lends itself to support the provision of education for all. Despite this changing learning environment, by and large the conventional thinking in the education world is "teaching can only take place by telling". The notion here is that it is effective 'telling' that holds the key to learning. This is the primary reason why the traditional mode of delivery is confined to the four walls of the classroom.

However, modern innovations, namely via multimedia technologies and the internet, have provided a viable alternative to this traditional concept of teaching only by telling and face-

to-face interaction.  More specifically, using ICT, learners can learn through "hands-on" experience, by interacting via "student forum", in the normal sense by collaborating and by continually exchanging ideas and experiences, which is known commonly as online learning.

We are not saying that lectures in the normal sense are not important or are not effective. But, what we are propagating is that instead of focusing entirely on "teaching by telling", as most of the lectures do, a more effective delivery mode is to blend the traditional mode of learning with the online learning. Online courses, to me represent a shift in educational philosophy and instructional design as the focus moves from "teaching" to "learning", leading to a student-centered rather than instructor-based system. A critical challenge for us as educators is to find the best way adjusting to this new paradigm.

Online learning, which is a relatively new way of learning, has to be administered with caution in order to maximize its potentials. We all realise that different educational institutions are likely to leverage the internet in different ways. Some will use it to reduce the cost of delivering courses and increase outreach to off-campus students; others will try to enhance the learning experience of on-campus students; others may facilitate large class management on campus.

Allow me to share with you some of the key success factors of online learning. Firstly, learners and teachers need to be adequately trained to enable them to reap the maximum benefits from this mode of delivery. Secondly, the providers have to develop high quality content that meets the needs of the learners. In more importantly particular, the content should have interactivity, animation, simulation and be exciting and engaging enough that will stimulate the thinking and learning capabilities of learners.

Thirdly, we should ensure that access to these contents is pervasive throughout the country. In other words, we have to overcome the issues of bandwidth and connectivity.

Fourthly, the cost to access these contents must not be prohibitive and beyond the means of the masses. This implies that the hardware, software and networks need to be appropriately priced by taking into consideration the overriding agenda of building learning communities.

Finally, we must not underestimate the human ware which makes up the most critical component of online learning. In this regard, it is indeed pertinent to inculcate the ICT culture among members of our society. In this context, we may also ask whether the education system has prepared our society to become a learning one.

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I have just shared with you on the various factors that would significantly contribute towards the adoption of online learning in a developing country like Malaysia. However, these factors on their own will not guarantee success in this endeavour. A more pertinent

issue that needs to be urgently addressed, as I have implied, is the propagation of a lifelong learning culture in our community.

Exploring the literature on lifelong learning, we may focus to four significant features of learning.

*1. Learning as a by-product of understanding and will be enhanced by doing*

One may observe that effective learning depends on thinking, and the more one thinks about something, the better it is comprehended. Understanding is vastly increased by doing. Learning-by-doing works best because performing a task requires learners to think and comprehend at the most difficult level, which is associated with problem solving or decision making and consequently implementing such a decision.

*2. Process of understanding depends on frequent feedback.*

In general, comprehension will increase when general understanding is applied more specifically to different contexts or situations. The adequacy of the understanding is then put to test and its results are fed back for further understanding. Thus, feedbacks are vital for an increase in understanding and learning.

*3. Learning is a progression through stages.*

A very interesting and challenging aspect of learning is that the process in itself is very dynamic. In fact, it changes as learners move into the next stage of learning. Thus, in itself, a learning process never stops and learners must adjust and conform accordingly in a very dynamic way.

*4. All learning is situated in a personal, social and organisational context, which determines motivation of the learners.*

Finally, we have to recognise the fact that learning does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, it is dependent upon local circumstances or situational variables such as the nature of the assessment, the attitudes towards learning, organisational, family and peer support. To a large extent, student motivation is determined by these factors. The effectiveness of learning technology, as a form of support to learners and teachers, will be determined largely by these wider factors, rather than by the intrinsic features of the technology or for that matter the content.

For the teacher or tutor, the core skills required will include the ability to interface with the technology and the ability to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each medium for instructional design. At the same time, it must be stressed that education providers need to train the tutors who will be interfacing with the students; and such training may prove costly and time-consuming.

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In our endeavour to promote lifelong learning in this country, Malaysia has embarked on a number of lifelong learning initiatives, although under different names, for quite some time. Lifelong learning is one of the main thrusts in the country's development plans (e.g. Third Outline Perspective Plan, 2001 – 2010). Our government has tried to establish a strong foundation for the development of a knowledge culture and provided the facilities to acquire knowledge and increase skills after the completion of formal education. Half of the recommendations of the Knowledge-Based Economy Master Plan, 2000 for instance are on the development of knowledge-based human resources. And these include education, skills training and retraining, lifelong learning and the sourcing of global talents.

At the same time, numerous institutions at the national, state and even district levels are established to enable school leavers to continue to acquire new skills and expertise. Government-related organisations like MARA, KEMAS, RISDA, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Human Resources and not forgetting the Ministries of Education and Higher Education are very active in propagating and providing facilities for skills and knowledge enhancement.

To epitomise all these developments, I quote a statement from the Honorable Prime Minister (then Deputy Prime Minister) at the launching of the ASEM's Lifelong Learning Initiatives in 2002:

> *... lifelong learning as a paradigm, a principle, a process, an attitude, a platitude, a form of capital and a means of status maintenance. ...The Malaysian Government, in our Third Outline Perspective Plan, … recognized the importance of Lifelong Learning. Lifelong learning will and is becoming increasingly important in the knowledge-based economy where knowledge and skills need to be continuously updated and upgraded.*

There is no doubt that the Malaysian government seems to be responsive and proactive on the idea of lifelong learning and its related role in enhancing our national growth and development. However, at the implementation level, there are still shortcomings that have to be managed and corrected. In fact, we have yet to develop a concrete set of strategies on lifelong learning in this country reaching all levels of society.

For example, while Korea has set up a credit bank system for lifelong learning, we are still debating on the issue of recognition of prior learning (RPL). Similarly, while UK Open University has no admission requirements, we are still maintaining a minimum 3 or 5 credits at SPM level before a candidate could gain admission into our only Open University.

While all of us agree that lifelong learning, learning communities and knowledge workers are essential for Malaysia's sustainable development, there are some very pertinent issues that we need to address. Let me quickly enumerate these issues and hopefully in the course

of this two-day workshop, these issues would be deliberated and suggestions to resolve them would evolve.

1. *Recognition of lifelong learning*
   To encourage life-long learning, we have to agree on the extent are we are willing to recognize the practical experience acquired in the workplace.

2. *Developing lifelong learning culture*
   As educators, we should play our role in promoting lifelong learning culture among our populace. We have to encourage the "thirst" for knowledge in our society among both our senior citizens and the young ones.

3. *Funding for lifelong learning programmes*
   We have to convince our populace on the fact that the money they spend on continuous learning is an investment on oneself and one's future. It is also a source of eternal gratification.

4. *Smart partnerships on lifelong learning and adopting ODL "best practices"*
   On the supply side, education providers must work together to ensure that our society gets the best from us. Smart partnerships, strategic alliances, sharing of services and outsourcing (SSO) are buzzwords of today's organizations. Where possible we should avoid the costly exercise of "reinventing the wheel".

5. *Strong ICT infrastructure and management*
   To cater for the needs of our ever-demanding and varied learners, particularly adult learners, we should be able to extend our educational services beyond our traditional physical campuses and boundaries. And we have to embrace ICT to assist us in achieving that. While the most critical issue for developing countries like Malaysia is computer access, it is equally important that students are psychologically ready and financially able to take part in online learning.

6. *Research and development in lifelong learning*
   Finally, the academic community or educators like us must always be at the forefront in ensuring the required changes in the educational scenario; to be supported by a strong research culture. This is the kind of leadership that is expected of the academic staff. We have to embark on innovative programmes and contents, new modes of delivery, creative learner support services and others to widen the choices available to our communities. On our part as education providers, we need to have the appropriate delivery systems not only because of the ever-demanding needs of the learners, but the ever aggressive competition from global providers in this borderless world today.

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Through the many years that most of us have been involved and participating in the process of educating people, we have come to realise that many innovative ideas in

education have been tried, but without fulfilling the promised impact on enhancing the learning experience. Not only that, at times huge expenses are incurred and losses have to be absorbed by the education providers as well as the learners. If we look from the national point of view, especially for a developing nation like ours, such pitfalls must be avoided because we can ill-afford any mistakes in the allocation of scarce resources. Such a situation will in fact worsen the digital divide between the richer states and the poorer states, the urban and rural communities, the richer and poorer income groups.

As such, I am of the view that national leaders and educators alike need to carefully examine the utilization of ICT and ensure that they meet not only our needs but more importantly the needs of our learners. Thus, ODL institutions such as OUM must at all times be able to deliver high quality teaching materials, effective and responsive student support system, and excellent management and planning logistics. At this juncture, it may also be appropriate that one can suggest the importance of positive collaboration and sharing of ICT facilities amongst the public universities, thus maximising the utilisation of scarce resources and hopefully in the long-run allowing for integration of systems.

Our OUM experience indicates that the utilisation of ICT must be an integrated part of the overall strategic plan of the university. There is, I believe, no other choice. This is also the reason why we in OUM spend substantial efforts on the development of our "Learner Management System" (myLMS) and Digital Library. The focus should be on the needs of learners and not on the ICT itself. In this regard, the use of ICT must be based on the principle of "fit-for-purpose" and the use of ICT must be in the context of total and complete learning environment. In other words, the utilization of ICT must not be piecemeal or ad-hoc in approach but must be totally integrated in the overall learning system. Understanding the whole process of online learning philosophy and underscored by the commitment of every academic and supporting staff of any ODL institution will therefore be a very critical success factor.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that the appropriate use of ICT can greatly assist in building learning communities and in the process bridge the digital divide through online learning. However, we must admit that there is no simple solution to bridging the digital divide. For developing countries like ours, access to the internet and new technologies must at all times be supported by initiatives to address the larger question of quality education; and thus excellence. To-day's evidence indicates that the more developed nations will find IT networks a tremendous stimulant, accelerating productivity in all sectors of the economy as well as enhancing research and innovations. But, for communities in the developing countries, they could continue to fall behind, if developments in ICT are not properly and actively nurtured.

In a small way, the management of OUM today is indeed proud to be part of the country's initiative in democratising higher education; given that we now have almost 23,000 students in our enrolment; and thanks to the internet and IT, we are able to reach almost all our students, irrespective of time and space. This is certainly, to my mind, the essence of life long learning via online learning.

Finally, I hope what I have said would be useful; and I wish every participant present this morning will have a very rewarding workshop.

In the name of Allah, the Almighty, Most Loving and Most Merciful, I now officially declare open this workshop.