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Higher Education and the Middle East: Serving the Knowledge-based Economy

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Leveraging on Technology via International Collaboration: Open University Malaysia's (OUM) Experience in the Middle East

Anuwar Ali

The development of information communication technology (ICT) has transformed the world into a global village, facilitating the flow of knowledge, information, and people like never before. Its impact on everyday living is apparent, fundamentally changing the way people think, work, and play. Within education, the impact of ICT may not be as extensive as in other fields. This is because education is often perceived as a socially-oriented activity where the teacher's main role is to transmit knowledge and be a role model.

Given that knowledge has become an important component of the nation's economic progress, the shift towards a "knowledge society" means the role of technology is becoming increasingly important. Technology is already supporting more effective learning, research, and administration — enabling greater access to education and a rewarding educational experience. It influences the development of academic innovations, such as e-learning and mobile learning, academic partnerships and collaborative research, enhances quality, and encourages transparency.

The ever-increasing demand for higher education, especially in developing countries, has inevitably led universities to re-examine the way that education is being delivered. A feasible solution is to embark on distance education and ICT-based learning, provided that such technologies are properly mastered and the necessary resources made available, including hardware, software, and trained manpower.

In this context, this essay seeks to share the experiences and initiatives taken by the OUM to position itself as a cross-border open and distance learning institution by using technology as an enabler to offer quality programs on a global scale through international partnerships, particularly in the Middle East.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

As Malaysia's first open distance learning (ODL) institution, OUM has capitalized on technology for its blended pedagogy since its inception in 2000. While ODL is relatively new in Malaysia, its importance cannot be overstated in line with the Government's move to provide Malaysians with greater access to higher education. The use of ICT in

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education through e-learning can play a vital role in democratizing education, especially in developing countries. Apart from providing a cost effective means of delivery, it creates an education experience that is more responsive to the learners' needs and aspirations, thus providing the flexibility that allows learners to study at any time and place.

As indicated in Chart 1, OUM's blended pedagogy employs a multi-mode strategy that combines online learning with face-to-face interaction and self-managed learning. Learners are provided with print modules to read on their own and are required to attend tutorial classes and participate in online forums with their tutors and peers. The learning management system (LMS) is an integral part of the ODL system. In OUM, this learning platform, known as the myLMS, was internally developed. It allows learners and tutors to communicate, share information, access course materials and e-content, and keep them in the loop on academic matters and developments taking place within the university.

CHART 1
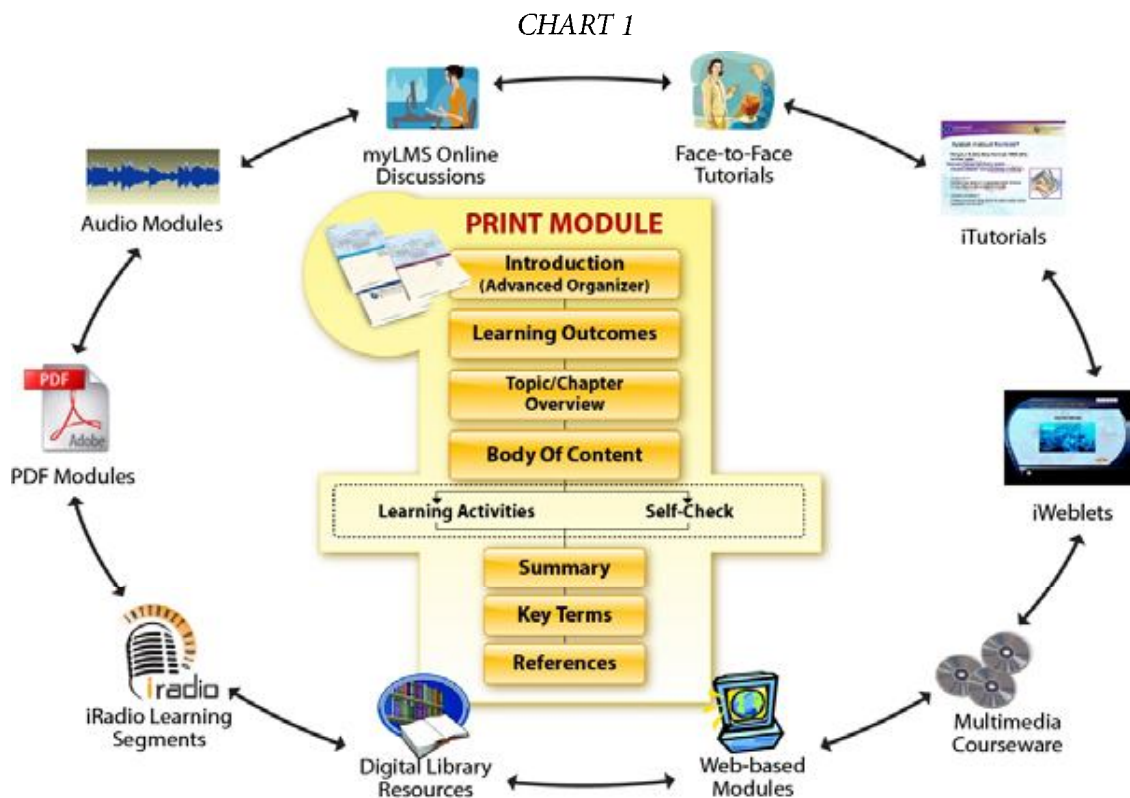
The advantage of self-managed learning is that learners can determine their own learning goals and map out ways to achieve them. However, for effective learning to take place, excellent IT support and the availability of quality learning materials are important. Learning materials in the form of learning objects, courseware, iTutorials, and other interactive media are meant to further enrich the learning experience. OUM learners can also access the Digital Library, iRadio, and other web-based technologies to complement their learning.

OUM's Digital Library is one of the most comprehensive online libraries in the country. It holds a wide range of re-

sources in print and online format. Collectively, the Digital Library has close to 30,000 volumes of printed books and subscribes to over 82,000 e-books, 32,000 e-journals, and about 930,000 e-thesis titles. These digital collections are accessible to all registered learners and play an important role in supporting teaching and learning.

iRadio is a webcast service managed by the university that streams module-related and "infotainment" programs. It is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and even includes podcasts and audio downloads, allowing learners to listen to any of the programs during their spare time. Interestingly, the i-Radio remains a popular information channel and is being accessed by listeners from over 100 countries.

The deployment of mobile technology is one of OUM's latest initiatives to support teaching and learning. Through mobile learning (m-learning), learners who are enrolled into the university's compulsory "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners" program receive regular reminders, as well as motivational and educational text messages. These text messages are also registered and can be tracked on the Twitter webpage of the corresponding course. Twitter, a popular social networking website, is an integral component of the m-learning project. It provides quick and convenient access to relevant information, thus making the delivery of ODL more effective.

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Being learner-centered, OUM is constantly searching for ways to enhance its delivery mechanism. Leveraging technology as an important enabler, it is able to fulfill the expectations of learners by providing them with a rewarding learning experience.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Like many other developing countries, Malaysia introduced new legislative acts in the 1990s in a bid to transform the country's higher education landscape. This led to partnerships with foreign institutions of higher learning while at the same time promoting the role of the private sector in higher education.

This is also in line with the country's vision to make Malaysia a regional center of educational excellence. Malaysia targeted 80,000 foreign students by 2010. To achieve this goal, higher education institutions, both public and private, are encouraged to enroll international students. In support of this, the Government allows the offering of a wide range of cost-effective study options, putting in place stringent quality assurance policies as well as allowing foreign universities to set up branch campuses locally. While many educational institutions are providing the impetus to attract overseas students into the country, a few others began exporting their educational services overseas in an effort to realize the Government's vision.

OUM's internationalization efforts began in 2005 when it collaborated with Universitas Riau, Indonesia, and University of Science and Technology, Sana'a, Yemen. The University's expansion in the Middle East later led to the partnership with Arab Open University in Bahrain. OUM has since expanded into other countries, collaborating with Villa College in Maldives and Accra Institute of Technology in Ghana. Internationalization is vital to OUM's continued success in paving the path to become a cross-border education provider.

The Middle East remains one of the University's important markets, with cumulative enrollment in Yemen and Bahrain exceeding 700 learners to date. OUM offers primarily postgraduate degree programs in business administration and information technology at both Master's and PhD levels. Learners from these countries find OUM's flexible mode of learning a great advantage to their busy work schedule, as the majority of the learners are working adults. About 200 of the learners from these two countries have since graduated. These graduates were generally satisfied with the quality of the programs and services rendered. A significant "pull factor" for these graduates was the flexible mode of learning that allowed them to further their academic ambition without jeopardizing their work and personal commitments.

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Another milestone in OUM's internationalization effort is the "Total e-Learning Solutions" project commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). OUM and its associate company, METEOR Technology and Consultancy Sendirian Berhad, were appointed as consultants for the project, which was to be implemented in two stages over a period of five years.

The first phase, which began in February 2007, saw the establishment of the National e-Learning Centre (NeLC) and the introduction of e-learning facilities in institutions of higher learning throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In the nine months of the first phase, OUM experts were stationed in Riyadh to supervise the installation of learning management systems and related infrastructure, trained Saudi IT personnel in courseware development, and assisted the Kingdom's Ministry of Higher Education in carrying out awareness and promotion programs on e-learning.

The second phase will begin soon with the geographical expansion of the e-learning facilities and making these available throughout the Kingdom. The strength of this relationship lies in the knowledge, especially from the perspective of the Ministry of Higher Education, the KSA, that OUM and METEOR Technology and Consultancy can together deliver the e–learning platform that is relevant to the Kingdom.

Realizing the importance of reaching out to a global audience, OUM launched OUM International in 2008 to spearhead initiatives for collaborative partnerships with institutions of learning across the globe. OUM International's client portfolio is diverse and the programs it offers are designed to cater to specific client needs. The programs are essentially needs-based training modules aimed at developing human capital, research, and consultancy services, and project man-

agement activities. Other activities of OUM International include organizing conferences and study tours alongside promoting short and long-term training programs in areas of education, public administration, environmental education, financial management, health, and information technology.

OUM International network of international partners include those in Bahrain, Yemen, and the KSA. Among its high-profile training programs is one involving high-ranking officials from the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) in the KSA, which began in 2004. The program is still running, and OUM International has since trained over 500 staff. A significant development of the program was the signing of an agreement with TAFE College, an affiliate of Victoria University in Australia, to offer a niche program for selected TVTC staff.

A new development in OUM's internationalization effort was the collaboration with Eszterhazy Karoly College, Hungary, to offer postgraduate programs involving the Master of Business Administration, Master of Information Technology, and Master of Instructional Design and Technology, a fully online program that is taught by academicians from around the world, including the Middle East.

Malaysia's comparative advantage in terms of socio-cultural and religious similarities in the region as well as the low cost of education and good bilateral ties it enjoys with countries in the Middle East has helped boost Malaysia as a viable education provider. Over the last five years, Middle East students have sought safer and more affordable options closer to home, resulting in an increasing number of Middle East students furthering their studies with Malaysian universities, including OUM.

CONCLUSION

For a fairly "young" university, OUM has to find ways not only to sustain itself but also develop new means and resources to propel itself as one of the leading players in ODL. Constant innovation is a necessity for the university to remain relevant in catering to the increasing demand for quality higher education, both in Malaysia and internationally. In light of this, the University has chosen to tread new paths and seek new ventures with other institutions.

Collaborative partnerships with other institutions across the world are crucial in improving the quality of programs offered. Such collaborations are also a source of income, widening the participation of international learners and facilitating OUM's entry into new markets. Collaborative partnerships also lead to resource optimization by distributing costs among partners while expanding services to global learners. OUM is now acknowledged as a reputable global player, evidenced by its increasing number of international student numbers and the establishment of learning centers abroad.

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Having been in operation for almost a decade and with a cumulative student intake exceeding 90,000, OUM will continue to rigorously pursue its vision of becoming a Mega University. A part of this strategy is to increase the number of international learners through international partnerships as we have seen in the past five years in the Middle East.

To strengthen its comparative advantage, OUM will continue to focus on the important aspects of higher education, namely quality assurance, accreditation, research capability, and enhanced scholastic development. These are important elements for students when choosing institutions for their higher education. By ensuring the quality of all its programs and effective delivery, OUM strives to complement the Government's efforts in transforming Malaysia into a center of academic excellence and contributes to the development of its human capital.