

MALYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

No one can deny that the world is more interdependent, interlinked and integrated with the development of information technology. This in turn has facilitated the flow of knowledge, information and people as never before. Higher education is expected to contribute and become far more internationalised to integrate intercultural elements in its teaching, research and services. This paper summarises the initiatives taken by Open University Malaysia (OUM) to market its programmes at the international level. In the initial phase, the university is targeting its neighbouring country, Indonesia as well as countries in the Middle East, particularly Yemen, Syria and Saudi Arabia.

The first programme to be offered will be at the Masters level in Universitas Riau (UNRI), Pekanbaru, Indonesia, and in the University of Science and Technology, Yemen (USTY), followed by the undergraduate programmes at Universitas Padjadjaran (UNPAD), Bandung, Indonesia. In the near future, the scope will be widened to include both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the universities concerned. This paper outlines the issues, challenges and the strategic plans to develop and ensure the success of OUM's Internationalisation agenda, an agenda which is aligned to the Malaysian Government's policy of developing Malaysia as a Centre of Excellence in education and training.

Introduction

As many of us are fully aware, countries which place education as the highest priority in their development planning, seem to benefit through a remarkable growth in their economies; and in many cases, propelling their national competitiveness globally while at the same time ensuring a better standard of living for their citizens. It is also in this context that national governments are trying their level best, given the constraints of resources and funding, to find new ways of enhancing the education sector while refining and strengthening existing policies and strategies. While it is critical that the whole education system, from the primary right up to the tertiary level, is given the appropriate weightage in terms of policy orientation, an alternative strategy of giving greater access to university education through open and distance learning (ODL) should also be explored. In line with the principal theme of this conference, I wish to share with you some of my thoughts on how ODL can contribute to the process of democratisation of higher education in developing countries of Asia by giving some examples drawn from the experience of Malaysia.

Enhancing Human Capital & Education for All

As a developing country moves towards a higher phase of economic development, the higher education sector is expected to respond in such a way as to produce not only the right type of human capital but also in the right number and quality that matches with the needs of an expanding economy. This is also critical from another perspective; namely the capacity of the country to expand its supply of knowledge workers who are adept at initiating innovations and technological breakthroughs, which will ultimately be the most important catalyst for societal change.

Naturally, it is the government's responsibility to provide funding for the above capacity building. However, of late we observe that many governments are reducing its funding on public universities. Instead, these universities are expected to seek new sources of funding and generate their own income

via the commercialisation of R&D activities, consultancy and marketing a number of academic programmes. To make up for this shortcomings, the private sector is expected come forward and complement the government's efforts in this endeavour

Universities have been asked to be entrepreneurial to cope in the digital age and to manage the digital revolution and in the process produce knowledge workers so that the country is able to make the transformation into a knowledge-based economy. A UNESCO report indicated that the recent modernisation of education systems in Asia-Pacific region was largely due to the use of information and communication technology (ICT). For this reason, a number of countries have put in place ICT policies and strategies to facilitate curriculum integration, enhance knowledge management and pedagogical collaboration in their education systems.

Let us examine e-education initiatives in various countries of the region. For example, there is now a greater amount of political will and national commitment in Malaysia to develop and implement e-education for its citizens. This is evident in the various e-learning initiatives such as the setting up of the National Consultative Committee for e-learning, R&D ventures and tele-centres at the national level. To enable e-education to be diffused nationally, efforts are being made to improve broadband penetration as in the National Broadband Plan, to ensure the development of infrastructure standards and e-education standards.

Our neighbouring country, Thailand as an example, has the commitment to develop and implement e-education initiatives such as Education Act (revised in 2002), the National IT Policy, the ICT Master Plan and the National ICT for Education Master Plan. Another neighbour, Singapore, has an extensive broadband network providing greater access to all schools and tertiary institutions. The pervasiveness of video streaming has been effective in humanizing the e-learning experience in Singapore, enhancing student performance and reducing failure rates. The provision of quality ICT applications with greater transparency and well-informed choices coupled with higher degree of public responsibility and accountability are also becoming more apparent in countries such as India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Qatar and Kazakhstan.

The role of education is seen as one of the effective ways to eradicate poverty, provide occupational and social mobility and enhance the overall quality of life. This is clearly stated in UNESCO's constitution in which 190 nations proclaim their belief in Education for ALL. Thus, one can observe that there has been an international commitment to bring education to all, going back some 60 years ago; although the achievements in many countries are disappointingly well below expectations.

As we are aware, the primary reason for this relatively poor performance is that many developing countries are so disadvantaged that they are unable to "take-off" economically; thus reinforcing their inability to provide adequate funding for educational purposes. This is a kind of vicious circle that is further complicated as the provision of education has become increasingly costly, especially at the tertiary level. The lack of expertise in a number of disciplines and the absence of a strong university-industry linkage are factors which hinder the formation of a sound human capital base. Thus, a more creative approach is needed to provide an alternative avenue for increasing access to all levels of education, especially at the tertiary level.

Reforming Higher Education in Malaysia

Let me now share with you the latest developments on the higher education sector of my country. Following the examples of other more developed countries, Malaysia is one of those countries that strongly believe in providing education for all. We fully subscribe to UNESCO's call for providing ample opportunities to all our citizens to acquire education at all levels. We also believe that there is a need for a strong foundation in the development of a knowledge culture and the provision of the necessary facilities to acquire knowledge and skills for every member of our society.

In line with a rapidly changing learning scenario, affected mainly by globalisation and far reaching innovations in information and communication technology (ICT), the Malaysian Government has embarked on an initiative to involve the private sector vigorously as providers of educational services. This became very visible since the mid 1990s, during which a number of legislative edicts were introduced propelling the growth of private sector education.

Presently, 30 percent of the 17-23 age cohort enrolls in tertiary education. The Government has set an enrolment target of 40 percent for this cohort by 2010. In achieving this target, as indicated earlier, the government introduces policies that allow the establishment of private higher education institutions (PHEIs). This development has led to a rapid expansion of not only in the number of educational institutions, but also provides the opportunity for education providers to build their capacities as well as create a healthy and competitive education industry. To this end, the Ministry of Higher Education has set a target of 1.6 million places in tertiary education by 2010.

With this relatively rapid democratisation process in tertiary education, it is hoped that an expanding and a more competent workforce can support the fast changing needs of the economy which is increasingly driven by knowledge and IT-based activities. With a greater number of highly skilled human resources, Malaysia, being one of the more important trading nations in the world, will have to be more competitive globally. During the initial years of its economic development, Malaysia depended on low wage labour with low skills to generate mainly labour-intensive manufacturing activities, including textiles, motor-vehicle assembly and electronics. But with increasing competition from even lower wage labour from other developing economies since the end of 1980s, China being the more visible, we now have to rely on higher level skills and proficiency to add value to the country's products and services.

Today, it has become a clarion call for many universities not only to develop knowledge workers by producing the best graduates, but also become the centres for creativity and innovation. If the priority of the Malaysian government is to create a greater supply of knowledge workers, then more opportunities and university places be given to school leavers and even working people.

This strategy will certainly contribute towards the formation of a knowledge-based economy, hopefully providing the appropriate platform for sustainable economic growth and making a greater impact in the global market place. Simultaneously, capacity building will be a fundamental aspect of this change; including the capacity to innovate, adapt, design and develop new products and markets.

In this kind of environment, the formation of a knowledge-based economy will be in place, propelling the country towards an industrialised nation status. The impetus to achieve such a status should begin by exploring the many possibilities and options through which the country has to enhance its human capital. One of the vehicles is certainly by developing ODL to its fullest potential.

Open and Distance Learning: A Very Viable Solution

The experiences of both developed and developing countries during the last few decades have shown that ODL is a viable approach in providing an increasingly appropriate solution to enhance accessibility, affordability and flexibility in education. Studies have shown that on the average, ODL delivery mode costs approximately 40 percent of the traditional mode. But costs alone are not a sufficient criterion in choosing a particular mode of delivery. What is more important is its quality. In this respect, we have also evidence where the materials delivered by ODL are of superior quality when compared to the traditional universities.

In tandem with its lower costs and high quality learning materials, the ODL mode can thus be propagated as the preferred mode of providing education for all in any part of the world. The proliferation of mega universities (universities with a student population of 100,000 or more) throughout the world bear testimony to the impact of ODL.

In today's education scene, building learning communities have been found to be valuable and relevant, especially within the context of the digital age where many adults are already connected to computers and the Internet. Hence, networking amongst learners through online discussion forums for collaborative e-learning has become very common in the more developed countries; and is getting popular in the Malaysian higher education institutions.

Collaborative e-learning is an application of constructivist theories of learning that supports adult learning in many positive ways. Efforts in establishing interactive learning networks will be a critical success factor in our move away from "providing instruction" to "producing learning." Efforts must be galvanised to produce not only digitally literate graduates as a result of the process but also graduates who are adept at thinking, rationalizing, analysing and articulating ideas as a result of collaborative e-learning experiences.

Higher education used to be for the privileged few – the elites and the high academic achievers. Universities in the 19th and 20th century were autonomous elite institutions based on a homogenous culture and values of scholarship, dedicated to long-term, academic education and research, and supported by governments or charity institutions on behalf of the public good. But for the 21st century the perception has changed such that higher education is associated with mass-oriented activities, culturally heterogeneous, and supported by a wide array of public and private sources.

Under the traditional and conventional mode of thinking on higher education, its purpose is basically to **provide instruction**. However, a new paradigm has emerged under which the principal purpose of higher education is to **produce learning**. Moving from an environment that "provides instruction" to one that "produces learning" requires not only a paradigm shift but doing it in such a way that will provide an environment acceptable to learners using effective pedagogies and utilizing the most up-to-date technologies where appropriate.

In other words, the challenge is to move from a teacher-centred curriculum to a learner-centred curriculum. We need to think of ways that will engage students in the learning process. However, it is quite evident that in the Asian educational environment, the curriculum is still largely teacher-centred. Teachers tend to regard themselves as "experts" and love being the main source of reference. Our Asian society is generally uncomfortable when students know more or have better ideas than the "teacher".

There is also a need to design and offer various learning activities to cater to the different learning styles of learners. There is a need to establish an interactive curriculum which is holistic and where pedagogies are effectively applied to inculcate a positive learning culture. Simultaneously it is imperative that we develop a mechanism to effectively assess the learning outcome both quantitatively and qualitatively. Changing the mindset of educators will take a significant amount of unlearning and relearning. It is indeed a challenge that many developing countries like Malaysia have to face.

A paradigm shift among education providers is a requirement before it can provide education for all or for lifelong learning. Under the current environment, we should no longer think that education is only for the academic achievers. We should start thinking that every citizen has a right to education in support of the lifelong learning philosophy. In the process, we are allowing greater access to higher education, thus making the democratisation of higher education a reality. We are fortunate today in the sense that the digital age comes with opportunities to leverage on ICT. At this juncture, please allow me to elaborate on this point using the example of Open University Malaysia (OUM).

Malaysian's First ODL Institution

OUM was established as Malaysia's first open distance learning institution. It was also Malaysia's seventh private university, established in August 10, 2000. Its mission is to: (a) be the leading

contributor in democratizing education, (b) develop quality education through multi-mode learning technologies, and (c) develop and enhance learning experiences toward the development of a K-based society. It is driven by its motto, “University for All” and is today offering opportunities to the students who have enrolled to acquire a degree. It is Malaysia’s preferred choice for individuals who are working and unable to leave their full-time jobs or businesses. From an initial intake of 753 students in August 2001, OUM has grown to almost 32,000 students in our current September Semester 2005.

OUM offers a blended mode of learning to cater to the various learning styles; and more significantly to provide flexibility without sacrificing the quality of its programmes. The three learning modes are: face-to-face learning, e-learning and self-managed learning. To leverage on ICT, e-learning is the means by which learners are connected to each other throughout the semester apart from the face-to-face tutorial sessions. Learners benefit from the online communities of learning, learning from and with each other as well as socializing with each other, and communicating with their tutors.

Through online teaching and learning, the democratization and humanization effects can be achieved. It is thus important to ensure that as a university, we provide adequate ICT infrastructure within the organization and for the government to provide the populace with the last mile connectivity, broadband facilities as well as affordable access to the Internet. Malaysia is fortunate to have 25 percent of its population connected to the Internet and will soon be rolling out a national broadband plan to increase the areas serviced and to cater to the more sophisticated demands of the Internet among its wired populace.

I have little doubt that all of us who are here today are convinced of the notion that ODL providers have contributed substantially in the democratisation of education in many parts of the world. The trends that we have observed in many countries and the success of a number of ODL institutions being called “mega universities” speak for itself. While Malaysia is relatively new as far as ODL is concerned, the support currently shown by government leaders towards lifelong learning and e-learning, I believe, will bode well for ODL in the future.

Being new, we also benchmark ourselves against other well-established ODL institutions such UKOU, HKOU, KNOU, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, IGNOU, UTI and many others. Their vast experiences in ensuring quality programmes and learner support services have been a tremendous help in mapping our learning strategies. Equally important, quality becomes our guiding principle in strategising our internal processes so that OUM learners will be engaged in an enriching and rewarding learning experience throughout their study years. To do this, the following support systems and services have been put in place:

1. Learner Services Centre
2. Digital Library
3. Learning Management System
4. Integrated Student Management System
5. Distributed Learning Centres
6. ICT Services, and
7. Academic Counseling Services

Under a learner-centred environment as we practice nowadays, we have little choice but to continuously improve the quality of teaching and learning among OUM learners. As such, our research and development efforts have been fundamentally directed towards improving institutional performance. In this regard, our research activities have been focused on areas such as service quality, learners’ priority and satisfaction, collaborative online learning, module development processes, e-learning readiness, effectiveness of academic counseling, development of e-content and performance of tutors. The results of these researches have been dissected and debated amongst our faculty members; after which they are used to improve our internal processes and operations.

Challenges for Democratisation of Education

While we at OUM are very proud of our achievements thus far, I must admit that there is still room for improvement in our internal processes which the management is meticulously monitoring so that every faculty, department or unit is focused in achieving OUM's objectives. At the same time, we are also faced with several challenges that are external to us, but nevertheless, needing solutions and strategic initiatives. Based on OUM's experience, the key issues and challenges that must be addressed are as follows:

- How do we ensure education is available to all?
- How do we ensure that our education system continuously provide knowledge and skills that are relevant at the workplace?
- How do we ensure that our learners can learn at anytime and from anywhere?
- How do we ensure that our learners embrace active and interactive learning?
- How do we encourage self-managed learning among our learners?
- How do we encourage effective use of technology in an ODL environment?; and
- How do we ensure that the democratisation of education does not result in inequalities between the haves and the have-nots?

The above issues and challenges would require some rethinking on the part of government leaders and policy makers, leaders of educational institutions, academics as well as industry managers. At the macro or national level, some existing policies need refinement or enhancement while others may need a total revamp. A continuous dialogue between these stakeholders would indeed be useful. A very fundamental aspect of education, particularly higher education, is the need to enhance awareness about open learning and the positive impact of encouraging lifelong learning.

As educators, I believe that we should play our role diligently in promoting a lifelong learning culture within our society. We have to encourage the "hunger and thirst for knowledge" among both the senior citizens and the youths. We also need to constantly seek ways to promote and to reach out to those whose potential in intellectual development has not been fully developed. In short, creating a populace who wants to learn by choice rather than by chance is what we should aim for. By using ICT blended with conventional technologies, we should be able to produce more effective learning programmes for those who have the desire to learn. At this stage, I would venture to suggest the some possible options:

First, the education system needs to embrace fundamental change in the learning process. There is a need to replace the information-based, teacher-directed rote learning provided within a formal education system to one that will allow greater latitude for students' creativity and ability to apply, analyse and synthesise knowledge.

Second, the government needs to play a central role in promoting, developing and nurturing "education for all" among its citizens. This is an important aspect of nurturing awareness within the community to continuously seek knowledge. The establishment of OUM's School of Lifelong Learning (SOLL) recently is certainly relevant for this purpose.

Third, in line with the rapid changes in information technology, the government and industry must collaborate in developing adequate and affordable ICT infrastructure to reduce the digital divide among the country's citizens; thus promoting "connectivity in learning." Besides affordability, the question of accessibility to the larger segment of the community needs to be simultaneously resolved. The relatively high costs of investment in providing such an infrastructure must be balanced with its potential to allow not only the dissemination of knowledge but also the efficient management of the organisation. Technology, as we all realise, is also an efficient enabler in promoting advances in pedagogy and learning culture.

Fourth, as the costs of education at all levels become more restrictive, the private and public sectors need to work together to finance learning. In complementing the role of the public sector, the private sector must be encouraged to play an increasing role in education while ensuring its quality. Given that the public sector can no longer be the sole provider of education, adequate incentives for private education providers must be in place to increase spending on human resource training and development. Apart from student funding, the government must also provide adequate incentives for education institutions to be more innovative in developing their contents and modes of delivery in order to meet learners' needs.

Fifth, quality assurance systems are needed to assess the learners' achievement as well as the learning providers. Policy makers need to rethink on the accreditation of programmes and institutions. Traditional criteria of assessment need to be revised to reflect the recognition of prior learning (RPL), that is, knowledge, skills and understanding gained outside the formal education system. The need to give recognition to prior learning is a key ingredient for the development of our K-society.

Concluding Remarks

I hope by now we can agree that one of the key elements in the economic development of countries in this region is the democratisation of higher education, allowing the citizens of the country to maximise their potentials in acquiring knowledge and new skills. With the impact of globalisation and the rapidly changing scenario in technological development and innovation, developing countries in particular must be able to sustain the momentum of economic growth through the adoption of new approaches in upgrading their human capital.

I believe that ODL, with its open and flexible learning and leveraging on ICT, will be able to contribute towards increasing the socio-economic well-being of any nation. In higher education, it will certainly complement the traditional or conventional university mode; and hopefully will together shape the future of learning. Finally, we must also bear in mind that the capacity to effectively sustain our economic growth and development will be dependent upon the receptiveness to new and more flexible education and learning systems.