OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING AS THE KEY DRIVER OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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Abstract

The launching of the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning Malaysia: 2011-2020 marked a significant milestone in the country's efforts to achieve its aim of becoming a high income nation by 2020. The effective implementation of the Blueprint requires the commitment of all stakeholders. Providers of lifelong learning (LLL) must have the necessary capabilities to drive LLL and gain the confidence of the general public to engage in LLL. This paper propagates that the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) with its attendant characteristics, is the way forward in driving LLL in Malaysia. The unique features of the ODL are discussed in the context of its major processes such as: Curriculum Design; Teaching and Learning; Assessment System; Facilities and Infrastructure; Learning Materials and Learner Support Services.

Introduction

Malaysia's overarching ambition in this decade is to become a fully-developed nation by the end of the decade. The critical success factor to that end is the development and creation of high-skilled manpower of the first-class mentality. This is to be achieved by expanding its higher education sector. Malaysia is not unique in this endeavour. According to Daniel, etc., "Expansion is now the defining trend in the worldwide development of higher education. Some predict that by 2020, 40 percent of the global workforce will be knowledge workers with a need for tertiary qualifications. So the World Bank, which made basic education its priority in the 1980s and 1990s, is now urging countries that have not yet done so to develop their higher education systems. And indeed, most claim that they want to join the knowledge society by following the example of developed countries, where age participation rates (APRs) in higher education of 40 to 50 percent are now perceived as necessary for sustained and sustainable development" (Daniel, etc. 2009).

The launching of the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning Malaysia: 2011-2020 by the Right Honourable Deputy Prime Minister in November last year, marked a significant milestone in the country's efforts to achieve its aim of becoming a high income nation by 2020. By appropriately recognising that lifelong learning (LLL) is the "Third Pillar" of human capital development in addition to the first two pillars of the "School System" and "Tertiary Education" systems, the Blueprint provides Malaysians the much needed impetus to make LLL their way of life and in the process, improve their social and economic standing in the society (Guan, etc., 2011) and help the country achieve its ambition in the process.

However, we have to recognise that for lifelong learning to be successful, it needs to fulfil certain preconditions (Dhanarajan, 2007):

1. There must be *access and equity* to learning. Learning through life is a fundamental

human right and learning must become normal and central to a person's life.

2. There must be *empowerment and engagement* in learning.

3. There must be *flexibility* in learning to cater for the diverse needs of learners.

4. There must be *awareness* among learners and *availability* of programmes suited to their needs.

5. There must be *learner-centredness* where learners should be the central focus of all learning ventures.

The good news is that technology has advanced so much that it is now possible to meet the above conditions with a greater level of effectiveness and efficiency than before. The open and distance learning (ODL) mode of delivery has opened up a wide array of options and has thus provided many opportunities for a lifelong learner to pursue his/her learning to realise his/her ambitions.

Two factors have led to an explosion of interest in ODL, namely, the ever-increasing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining and the rapid technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subjects at a distance (UNESCO, 2002).

Interestingly, the factors that have pushed the need for lifelong learning into the limelight recently appear to be similar to that of the above, namely:

1. Growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining for the changing workplace and emergence of new occupations and careers;

2. Advances in ICT and an explosion of knowledge; and

3. Increasing internationalization and other reasons.

The above puts LLL and ODL parallel to each other and this paper propagates that ODL is an appropriate mechanism to drive LLL in this country.

Objective of Paper

The objective of this paper is to present a compelling case for the appropriateness of open and distance learning (ODL) approach in driving LLL in Malaysia. It discusses the major processes of ODL institutions in relation to their relevance to LLL.

However, at the outset, it is made clear that ODL is not unique to an ODL institution per se, but rather it can be implemented by any education institution provided they have in place the appropriate delivery mechanism, resources, infrastructure, learning materials and organisational commitment necessary for its effective implementation.

ODL Institutions and LLL

In this section, we will demonstrate how successful ODL institutions have been in promoting LLL. In this regard, we would like to refer to the two major features that relate to these institutions. The first is the proliferation of ODL institutions worldwide. This is evidenced by the establishment of open universities in many countries in the world. In fact, recent literature reports that there are 85 open universities in the world with a presence in many developed and developing economies (Researching Virtual Initiatives in Education, 2012). The second is not only open universities are widespread in terms of their presence, but also in terms of their sizes. In 1996, John Daniel, coined the word "mega universities" which he defines as the distance teaching universities that enrol 100,000 or more students (Daniel, 1996). He also quoted the great Chinese leader, Deng Xiao Ping in saying that big distance teaching universities are 'better, quicker, more economical and efficient' (Daniel, 1998). Personally, he opined that open universities will continue to be the leader in the large scale distance education.

Incidental to that, Liebowtz, etc., 2010 pointed out that the demand for accessible lifelong education by the adult learner who requires anytime-anywhere access to higher education has intersected with the emergence and rise of the mega-universities.

The vision and mission of ODL universities themselves clearly indicate that they are drivers of LLL. Some examples of such universities are as follows:

Indra Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU):

Vision: "*IGNOU... shall provide seamless access to sustainable and learner-centric quality education, skill upgradation and training to all by using innovative technologies and methodologies*."

Mission: Two of its mission statements are: (1) *Take education to the hitherto unreached and promote community participation for local development through life-coping skills;* and (2) *Provide specific need-based education and training opportunities for continuous professional development and skill upgradation to in-service professionals.*

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU):

Vision: "*STOU aims at being a leading world-class open university that employs distance education to make lifelong education available to all*."

Wawasan Open University (WOU):

Core Value: "*We provide lifelong learning and personal development opportunities for everyone. To this end, we ensure open admission and access to all*"

Open University Hong Kong (OUHK):

Core Value: "*Recognizes the importance of sustainable and affordable high–quality programmes and courses across disciplines and at a variety of levels to meet the needs of lifelong learners*"

Open University Malaysia (OUM):

Mission: "*To widen access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities by*

leveraging on technology, adopting flexible mode of learning, and providing a conducive and engaging learning environment at competitive and affordable cost."

Open and distance learning (ODL) and e-learning are increasingly seen as key to providing access to the wider student population now seeking higher education, especially to working adults and those in remote rural areas. In 1988, there were only ten open universities in the whole 53-nation Commonwealth; by 2005 there were 13 open universities in India alone. Our latest literature search found that they are currently 85 open universities and the list is more than 100 if we include non-university institutions offering ODL mode of delivery (Researching virtual initiatives in Education, 2012)

The Iron Triangle of Education

The primary challenge of LLL can be expressed in the form of the three vectors of the iron triangle of education, namely *access, quality* and *cost*. Particularly, in the developing economies, there is an urgent need to open up greater access to education in order to expedite their socio-economic development. At the same time, the need for high quality work force and citizenry demands that the education received is of high quality. Traditionally, providing greater access will lead to a decline in the quality of education due to the inadequate physical and human resources, such as classrooms, teachers, learning materials, etc. To overcome these resource constraints, more funding is required to make available more resources, thereby increasing costs. Therefore, in the traditional model, it is not possible to break this iron triangle of education.

Recent developments in education are able to provide an alternative model to break the iron triangle of education (Daniel, *et.al*, 2009). These developments are inspired by the studies that have shown that *student-content* interaction has the greatest impact on learner performance compared to *student-student* and *student-teacher* or *face-to-face* interactions (Robert Bernard, *et al.*, 2008). This points to a new model of providing education to the masses by adopting ODL approach which takes care of the cost factor while increasing access and quality of learning by leveraging on ICT. The advancement in technology improves the quality of course delivery, content and communication with and among learners.

Characteristics of ODL

What are the fundamental characteristics of ODL that lend itself as the most appropriate learning approach that will drive LLL and satisfy the demands of modern-day learning community? To place the question in its proper perspective, we have to examine what an institution can do to promote and facilitate greater lifelong participation in higher education. Past studies involving the 2011 batch of OUM's graduates revealed that, among other aspects related to lifelong learning, *curriculum design, teaching and learning, assessment system and facilities and infrastructure* are significant factors in promoting LLL skills (Latifah, *et.al*, 2012). This section discusses these factors plus others and highlights how ODL provides the best option to drive LLL in this country.

Curriculum design

A crucial step in transforming education to produce lifelong learners is to create, revise and adopt content standards and learning objectives for all content areas that reflect 21st-century skills. Certain

changes are specific to courses such as adopting a modularized course approach to allow students to advance to higher levels of proficiency at their own pace. In general, well-rounded learners need to achieve proficiency in four major domains: (1) base competencies – mobilizing innovation and change, managing people and tasks, communicating and managing self; (2) General knowledge and values including understanding and appreciating other cultures and proficiency in other languages; (3) Specific skills in a specific area and (4) Specific knowledge in an area of expertise. Generally programmes offered by universities tend to emphasize on all except the base competencies. For the benefit of lifelong learners, there is a need for a revision of the curriculum to become competency-based rather than content-driven.

ODL institutions are open to a broad segment of population, primarily comprising of working adults and non-professional students. To serve these segments well, ODL institutions are committed to developing a curriculum that focuses on base competencies which would enable learners to cope with their workplace, people and change. For example, most of the undergraduate programmes in ODL require learners to engage in a project work based on the learners' work-related situations. This ensures that learners can immediately apply what they learn in the study programme to real life problems. The existence of this work-study relationship will encourage working adults to continue to study and acquire new knowledge as lifelong learners.

Teaching and learning

Another factor that promotes the development of LLL skills is teaching and learning. The traditional teacher-led learning is now being increasingly replaced by learner-centred learning because in the present ICT-driven environment, information is easily accessible to everyone, including the learners. In this regard, innovativeness and creativity in teaching is of utmost importance in getting learners to be engaged in learning. This requires committed face-to-face and online facilitators, various forms of learning materials and a reliable e-learning platform. ICT has enabled institutions to provide many forms of delivery modes whereby learners can choose to have all of their courses online or via the face-to-face interactions or a combination of both. The combination of these modes is limited only by the teacher's motivations and imaginations as well as the available technology. Through ICT, graphics and audio capabilities of the Web can be used to engage learners and improve interactivity which will result in effective learning.

This is where ODL institutions can play its role very well. By leveraging on ICT, ODL institutions are able to provide active and engaging learning experience by making available an interactive e-learning platform and learning materials. Learners can choose not to attend the face-to-face tutorials and opt for the fully online courses. Most ODL institutions adopt the blended mode of delivery comprising of face-to-face tutorials, online and self-managed learning.

Self-managed learning or sometimes referred to as self-directed learning is the basic skill required of a lifelong learner. In order to facilitate this form of learning, learners need to be provided with engaging learning materials (modules, workbook, text books, study guides, graphics and audio materials) which empower learners, and make them feel responsible for their learning. The e-learning platform is an ideal platform for collaborative learning; it facilitates self-reflection and enables learners to assess their understanding by going through the self-test. Having gone through the whole system of learning using ICT as a tool, it is expected that the learners are in a better position to continue learning as they have equipped themselves with the proper tools and attitudes.

Assessment System

A number of researches indicate that learners are particularly sensitive to the assessment requirements that govern their courses. Many are "cue-conscious", that is, they depend on the hints that lecturers provide. However, if learners are accustomed to the forms of assessment that encourage reproductive rather than transformational learning, they may have difficulty in adapting to the complexity of learning in the real world. How much has been learned should be the emphasis, and the appropriate method to assess the learning outcome which comes with timely feedback would be the best way forward.

In most ODL institutions, task-based assignment questions are used to enable learners to relate to what they have learned in the course and the rubrics that are provided for each assignment serve as a guide in preparing the answers. Meanwhile the examination questions are fairly distributed and developed according to the difficulty levels based on the Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. A learner-centred teaching strategy focusing on the learner rather than on the teacher is most likely to yield graduates who will be able to critically evaluate their own performance. In this regard, ODL institutions provide the necessary platform for learners to assess their own learning and carry out self-reflections as and when required via the institutions' learning management system.

Facilities and Infrastructure

Higher education needs infrastructure investments in order to fully utilise technology as a tool in the new learning environment. With such a technological infrastructure in place, higher education can create new learning models and achieve learning gains more effectively, efficiently, and economically. Higher education institutions also need to create a culture that encourages the use of ICT in the day-to-day activities of the learners. In order to create that culture, the ICT facilities must be reliable with easy access to the digital library, computer labs and other amenities such that at a click of a button, things get done. Working adults do not have the luxury of time for they need to accommodate their study hours in between their busy schedules.

Today, most ODL institutions leverage on ICT for their blended mode of teaching and learning, administration and support services which had helped them in providing their services to their learners more efficiently. The large number of learners and their widespread distribution in a typical ODL institution necessitate the use of e-learning. As a result, ODL institutions take great pains in ensuring that their e-learning facilities and infrastructure are well in place. Thus, learners are not only equipped with the necessary ICT tools in the course of their learning but the expediency and flexibility of ICT experience will enrich their learning experiences.

In the Malaysian context, as in the other developing economies, lifelong learners frequently need coaxing and encouragement to continue to learn and acquire knowledge after they have got a relatively comfortable job. However, if they realise that there are tools like ICT that can assist them in their learning and even at times make learning fun and enjoyable, the chances are, they will engage themselves in learning and seeking knowledge. Thus, ICT is the critical tool in LLL and ICT-driven learning environment can be a forceful mechanism in creating a learning community.

Learning materials

Another factor that can help improve lifelong learners' learning skills is the availability of well-developed, easily accessible and engaging learning materials. In Malaysia, the biggest challenge in the efforts of acculturating LLL is due partly to the lack of suitable learning materials. For the nation to move forward, efforts should be made to develop not only relevant and up-to-date learning materials, but they must also be interesting, fun-to-study and engaging to lifelong learners.

Another recent development in the area of learning materials is the move by some ODL institutions in developing the Open Educational Resources (OER), which are free quality learning materials that are made available on the Web for use, re-mix and re-use by anyone. This move will help propel and facilitate the LLL agenda. Malaysia should also be moving in this direction, and indeed the three ODL institutions, namely WOU, AeU and OUM have already embarked on this crucial venture. A recent research by (Ishan Abeywardena, *et al*., 2012) revealed that further support is needed especially at institutional level to facilitate capacity building in the use of digital resources and OER. Firstly, a culture of collaboration between institutions needs to be established to harness the full potential of open content. Secondly, greater capacity building is needed at an institutional as well as national level to familiarise users with the benefits and limitations of open content licensing; and thirdly, institutions need to establish set policies encouraging the wider use and re-use of open content.

It cannot be claimed that ODL institutions are able to develop all the necessary learning materials required by lifelong learners. However, due to the nature of their operations and delivery mechanisms, we contend that ODL institutions are better prepared to develop learning materials which are more suited for lifelong learners. In 1999, The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) together with Asian Development Bank (ADB) developed a toolkit for the systematic development of learning materials for ODL institutions (COL & ADB, 1999).

> "The materials have been designed in a flexible manner so that they can be used by a variety of trainers in a variety of situations. Their basic aim is to contribute to the development of essential skills related to the design and implementation of distance education programmes – an aim of great importance to both the Bank and The Commonwealth of Learning in their efforts to ensure that quality education is made available to all persons in a cost-effective manner."

The finding that *student-content* interaction has the highest impact on learner performance compared to the student-teacher and student-student interactions implies that greater efforts need to be undertaken to enhance the quality of learning materials. However, currently, much less effort has been directed towards enriching this aspect of interaction even though it is generally regarded as one of the least costly strategy (Daniel, etc., 2009).

In this regard, the nature of operation of ODL requires that its learning materials be well developed and meet the needs of its learners who are distributed and do not have the luxury of time on their side. In Malaysia, we believe that lifelong learners would benefit immensely from such carefully planned and meticulously developed learning materials.

Learner Support Services

Learner support services in ODL refers to a full range of activities developed to help learners meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge requisite to course and career success (Brindley and

Ross, 2004). Learner support services include all those interactive activities intended to support and facilitate the learning process from the learner's first point of contact with the institution, including tutoring, teaching, counselling, advising, orientation, administrative services and even peer tutoring and alumni support. Learner support services are intended to provide all information learners need; encourage students to fully utilise the available facilities; motivate learners to assimilate what they learn; provide necessary counselling; and create a friendly environment among learners, the faculty and the administration (Chander, 1998).

Learner support services are the lifeblood of ODL institutions primarily because of the overt challenges of high learner attrition rates and their corresponding needs and demands for a more personalised support system. As such, all successful ODL institutions have in place an excellent learner support system via face-to-face and online.

Lifelong learners can benefit a great deal from the support system provided by ODL institutions. Being on their own for most of their learning time, lifelong learners should obtain as much assistance as possible not only in directly coping with their study courses but also in resolving their personal problems related to their studies.

Recognition and Validation

There is a growing demand by adults and young people for validation and formal awards for the knowledge, skills and competencies they have acquired in non-formal and informal learning environments, to better equip them for a decent career. Recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning through non-formal and informal learning pathways is viewed as an important part of overall LLL strategies. The benefits of recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning include:

- Entrance into formal systems for further education or training

- Improvement of the learners eligibility in the labour market

- Certification of prior learning

- Transfer of competencies between different spheres such as education, work and home

- Enhancing universal basic education

Flexible Entry (FE) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) are the two means of recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning which can lead to increasing access and equity to higher education. This is necessary to fulfil the growing expectations and learning needs of individuals and communities in the rapidly changing global society and propagate the concept of learning through life.

ODL in Malaysia

ODL in Malaysia is a fairly recent phenomenon. Formal distance education programmes started in the country in 1976 when USM set up its on-campus distance education programme. Later, other public universities joined the bandwagon. The first truly ODL institution was formed in 2000 with the

setting up of Open University Malaysia (OUM), a wholly-owned subsidiary of METEOR, a consortium owned by the countries first eleven public universities.

Currently, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) designates 3 institutions as ODL-mode institutions. They are Open University Malaysia (OUM), Wawasan Open University (WOU) and Asia e-University (AeU). Apart from these institutions, MOHE has also allowed the other public universities to conduct their own distance and continuing education programmes in the ODL mode in addition to their on-campus full-time conventional programmes. There are also private higher education institutions that run their programmes on the ODL mode. Thus, in Malaysia, we have single mode ODL universities and dual mode ODL and conventional universities and colleges. This is a very positive development indeed for ODL in this country. It encourages open competition and will lead to greater efficiency. However, the countervailing viewpoint is that too many players in the market means less opportunity of reaping maximum benefits from the economies of scale, which is the primary advantage of ODL. As a nation, in this regard, we may lessen our competitive edge in the international arena.

Conclusion

The paper argues that ODL is an appropriate model to drive LLL in Malaysia. The main point of contention is that ODL has in place all the necessary characteristics to champion the LLL agenda of the country. These are exemplified by the following capabilities: (1) Designing curriculum which is more balanced with a strong focus on base competencies; (2) Providing active, engaging and collaborative learning experience by making available an interactive learning materials and e-learning platform; (3) Providing formative and summative assessment for adult learners which emphasises timely feedback for self-reflection and evaluation; (4) Leveraging on ICT for various blended delivery modes which allows greater flexibility; (5) Preparing and developing learning materials in a systematic way that caters for diverse learners; and (6) Putting in place an excellent learner support system to cater to learner enquiries, complaints, and suggestions using electronic customer relations management system (eCRM).

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