

Distance Learning Developments in Malaysia*
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Introduction

Distance education is a relatively new phenomenon in the Malaysian education scene. In its basic form it was introduced in 1971 when Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) established its Centre for Off–Campus Studies. In 1994, the Centre for Off–Campus Studies was renamed as the Centre for Distance Education. The Centre for Distance Education was upgraded in 1998 to School of Distance Education. From 1971 to 1989, USM is the only local university to offer courses through distance learning.

In 1990, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) started to introduce distance education in order to cater to the overwhelming demand for tertiary education. With branch campuses throughout the country, it was only natural for UiTM to introduce distance education.

In the period of 1993 – 2000, there was a significant increase in the number institutions that offer distance education. This came about as a result of the new policy of the Ministry of Education that encourages the introduction of distance education in Malaysian Universities.

On 10th August 2000, the first Open University Malaysia (UNITEM) was officially established. With the establishment of UNITEM, distance education in Malaysia is set to grow at an even faster pace.

Its vision is to be a world class center of excellence in distance education. The mission of UNITEM is to contribute towards the development of a knowledge society through distance education using an appropriate state–of–the–art technology

In line with its vision and mission, the objectives of establishing UNITEM are:

- a) To meet higher education aspirations using flexible, accessible and affordable system
- b) To provide life long learning opportunities, and
- c) To help the government in the democratization of education.

In western countries, the establishment of Open Universities is seen mainly to cater for the need of matured or adult learners. In Malaysia, the target group is not just adult learners but also school leavers. This requirement arises as a result of heavy demand for places at public universities. Some of the school leavers who are unable to secure places at public universities may find the

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cost to further their studies overseas or private institutions rather prohibitive. As such Open University Malaysia provides an alternative channel for this group of school leavers.

UNITEM – A Unique Institution

UNITEM is a unique institution as it was established as a private university yet owned by a consortium of the eleven public universities. Thus, UNITEM is a private university that is indirectly owned by the government. At the initial stage, UNITEM was funded by the shareholders fund coming from the eleven public universities. Within the first year of its establishment, the government has agreed to provide support in the form of:

- a) Launching grant during the first five years of its operation, and
- b) A government building to be used as its Campus/Operation Center of UNITEM

With the support of the government and the eleven public universities, UNITEM has managed to develop rapidly within a short period of time. A summary of student intake and number of courses offered during its first year of operation is shown below:

Intake	No. of students	No. of courses	Remark
August 2001	900	4	First intake
January 2002	900	7	Second intake
March 2002	2600	13	Third intake School teachers
August 2002	2600 (projected)	17 (projected)	Fourth intake

From the above table, it is projected that the total student enrolment during the first year of operation is about 7000. This is indeed a very positive development for distance education in Malaysia. Part of the reason for this rapid growth is due to the growing public confidence in UNITEM, innovative and quality academic programmes, flexible delivery system, affordable tuition fees and high quality curriculum that has been specially formulated to meet the needs of distance learners.

The linkage with the public universities provided several advantages to UNITEM. These include:

- a) Access to the libraries,
- b) Appointment of Professors as module writers,
- c) Access to proven and tested curriculum, and
- d) Access to tutorial/seminar rooms and laboratories for practical classes.

The tuition fees charged by UNITEM is very reasonable and affordable. Should the need arise, UNITEM students can:

- a) apply for loan from the National Higher Education Loan Fund,
- b) withdraw from Account 2 of the Employee Provident Fund, or
- c) apply for education loan from commercial banks

to pay for their tuition fees.

List of Distance Education Institution

Currently, the list of public and private Institutions offering distance education programmes is:

- 1) Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) ~ 1971
- 2) Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) ~ 1990
- 3) Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) ~ 1993
- 4) Universiti Malaya (UM) ~ 1994
- 5) Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) ~ 1995
- 6) Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) ~ 1997
- 7) Universiti Multimedia (MMU) ~ 1999
- 8) Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) ~ 1998
- 9) Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIAM) ~ 2000
- 10) Universiti Terbuka Malaysia (UNITEM) ~2000

With the exception of UNITEM, most of the Institutions mentioned above are dual-mode Institutions. In other words, these Institutions offer both full-time study and distance education. UNITEM is the only institution that focuses on open and distance learning.

Academic Programmes

The distance learning institutions offer various categories of programmes ranging from Arts to Engineering. The more established institutions offer more than twenty courses while the recently established institutions offer at least one course. Generally, the courses offered under distance mode and the courses offered on campus are the same in terms of curriculum, assessment mechanism and the conferment of degrees.

For Open University Malaysia, which does not have on campus students, the curriculum has been specially developed so that it is suitable for delivery through distance education. For the first intake, the following four courses have been offered:

- a) Certificate in Foundation Studies
- b) Diploma in Management
- c) Bachelor in Management and
- d) Bachelor in Information Technology

Three additional new courses were added to the list of courses for the second intake. These are **Diploma in Information Technology**, **Bachelor in Business Administration** and one double major course which is **Bachelor in Information Technology and Management**.

In the middle of last year (2001), the Ministry of Education requested UNITEM to develop six new courses under the Graduate Program For Teachers. The courses which have been identified are:

- a) Bachelor in Education (TESL)
- b) Bachelor in Education (Mathematics)
- c) Bachelor in Education (Science)
- d) Bachelor in Education (Mechanical Engineering)
- e) Bachelor in Education (Civil Engineering)
- f) Bachelor in Education (Electrical Engineering)

This initiative is part of the government policy to ensure that all teachers serving secondary schools should have a degree in relevant fields by 2005. Under this program, the Ministry of Education plans to send 3,700 teachers per year to follow a course of study at UNITEM for the next 5 years. The advantages of this program are:

- a) All teachers selected to study under this program will be given convertible study loan
- b) Teachers can continue to serve the school and at the same time study for their degrees through distance learning
- c) Teachers will be exposed to conventional as well as modern ways of learning (i.e. E-learning)
- d) For those teachers that manage to obtain at least 2.75 CGPA, 75% of the study loan will be converted into scholarship

Over the period of 5 years, 18,500 teachers will be trained. As the duration of study is 4 years, this project is expected to last for the next 9 years. The first cohort of teachers registers for their courses in March 2002.

In addition to the normal tertiary programmes, the Open University Malaysia also offers an array of life long learning programmes through its **Institute of Professional Development**. To date, the Institute of Professional Development offers Executive and Life Long Learning courses to selected clients. Currently, there are more than 20 programmes being offered by the Institute of Professional Development.

Admission Criteria

With regard to entrance requirement, all the Institutions of higher learning in Malaysia require entry requirement such as A-level, Diploma or an equivalence qualifications. Most Institutions do provide credit transfers for holders of recognized and related Diploma qualifications.

At Open University Malaysia, however, the entrance requirement is slightly different so as to meet the desire to democratize education. Apart from academic qualifications, UNITEM also practices the concept of **recognition of prior learning**. The table below illustrates a various possible ways in which the student can gain access to tertiary education at UNITEM.

Qualification	Course
2 credits in any subjects at SPM (O Level)	Diploma
2 credits in any subjects at SPM (O Level) plus 3 years working experience	Degree
1 principle and 2 subsidiaries at STPM (A Level)	Degree
Basic Degree with Honors	Master
Basic Degree without Honors but with working experience	Master

Learning Materials

Teaching materials are made up of a combination of one or more of the following:

- a) Printed Modules,
- b) CD-ROM,
- c) Web based,
- d) Audio and Video tapes, and
- e) Online Bulletin Board

Within this year (2002), radio, television and video conferencing will be introduced as part of the delivery system.

In February 2002, UNITEM set up a new center known as the Center For Instructional Design And Technology (CIDT). The main functions of this center are:

- a) To develop printed modules,
- b) To develop web based modules, and
- c) To develop other forms of learning materials such as CD-ROM, audio and video tape.

Instead of outsourcing the content development activities, UNITEM has decided to establish its own content development centre. This was done in order to ensure quality, prompt delivery and better control of the learning materials. Nevertheless, a small percentage of the content development will be outsourced to outside parties as and when it is appropriate.

Delivery Systems

As for the delivery system, a combination one or more of the following has been adopted:

- a) Face-to-face,
- b) Videoconferencing,
- c) Online learning and discussion,
- d) Radio conferencing, and
- e) Self-learning packages.

For online learning and discussion, UNITEM uses the WebCT delivery platform. When it comes to learning materials and delivery mechanism, UNITEM believes in the concept of “multi-mode”. Thus UNITEM students enjoy both the conventional and modern way of learning.

Statistic of previous intakes at UNITEM show two distinct groups of students. These are the 30% fresh school leavers (holders of SPM/O level) and 70% adult learners. The current delivery system practices by UNITEM is more suited to adult learners. As for the fresh school leavers, new approaches to learning need to be introduced. In particular, this group of students needs more frequency of face-to-face meeting. UNITEM is planning to address the need of this special group once more Regional Centers have been established at strategic locations nationwide.

Learner Assessment

The assessment mechanism comprises of both summative and formative components. The summative is made up of tests, assignments, laboratory reports and projects while the formative is made up of the final exam. Typical distributions of summative/formative assessments are in the range of:

- a) Summative assessment :(50% ~60%)
- b) Formative assessment: (40%~60%)

Student Support

A survey of the 11 Institutions that provide distance education shows a great variation in terms of student support. Generally, the services provided are made up of a combination of the following:

- a) Orientation / induction course
- b) Regional centers
- c) A network of Learning centres
- d) Tutors
- e) Facilitators
- f) Academic Counselors
- g) Regular Newsletter or Bulletin

- h) Distance Education Association
- i) Access to conventional and digital library
- j) Learner Service Center

UNITEM being a private university places considerable importance on areas of quality of academic programmes and student support. To ensure that all the students have an appropriate place to channel their grievances, a **Learner Service Center** was established. Students can contact the university through either one of the following channels:

- a) Toll free telephone
- b) Hand phones (for outside office hours)
- c) Fax
- d) E-mail
- e) Face-to-face

Conclusion

Open University Malaysia is a unique institution as it is the only Open University in the world that belongs to a consortium of 11 public universities. With the support of the government and the 11 public universities, UNITEM has managed to progress at a very fast pace and is set to grow at even faster pace in the coming decade. Within a year, the number of students is expected to grow to 7,000. With the introduction of postgraduate's courses in the middle of this year and the plan to offer courses to overseas market, the years ahead are indeed exciting and challenging for the Open University Malaysia.