An EPiC Solution to Teacher Education: Working with constraints

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Sub-theme: Technology-enhanced teaching and learning.

Abstract:

This paper focuses on explaining how the Faculty of Education and Languages, Open University Malaysia (OUM) works around constraints and policies set by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE) in its effort to upgrade the qualification of the in-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching programme. In line with the government's policy to increase human capital development MOE introduces new elements which are to be incorporated into the existing teachers' training curriculum. For OUM it means finding solutions to add another 15 credits to the existing programme without extending the duration of the whole programme. To meet this new challenge, a new approach is needed to comply with MOE's requirements. Education Portal for Internet Courses (EPiC) is created not only to meet the new requirements but also to add value to the existing programme. It is designed to virtually extend students' learning space and to provide full online learning and support. Its activities are scaffold, assignments are task based and learning draws on students' experience and personal reflections. The whole environment is designed to be fun and promote active collaboration between students and their online supervisors.

Background

Malaysia's aspiration to be a develop nation by the Year 2020 has brought a new set of challenges. One of the many challenges is to build its human capital and move towards knowledge-based economy. This means its main responsibility lies with the development of human and intellectual capital to produce adequate supply of, support and sustain a flexible, agile, and mobile workforce with relevant knowledge and skills (Halimah Awang, 2004).

(i) MOE-OUM Collaboration

In line with this government policy the Ministry of Education (MOE) has been in collaboration with Open University Malaysia (OUM) to upgrade the qualification of the non-graduate in-service teachers throughout the nation. The first collaboration started in May 2002 with the Bachelor of Education (SMP) programme followed by another two programmes; the Bachelor of Teachership (SMK) and the Bachelor of Teaching (SMP). For all programmes students have to complete 120 credits within 12 semesters or 4 years.

(ii) OUM's Blended Pedagogy

One of the main reasons why this collaboration is workable is OUM's blended pedagogy. The adoption of OUM's blended mode provides MOE with a winning formula in terms of being able to upgrade the teachers' qualifications without needing to disrupt their school routines. The blended mode (Figure 1) consists of three components: *self-managed* learning that supplies students with modules supported by CD-ROM courseware, digital library, physical library, peers and tutors; *online learning* which supports students with e-resources and discussion forums; and *face-to-face tutorials* which provides students with contact classroom (Anuwar Ali, 2010).
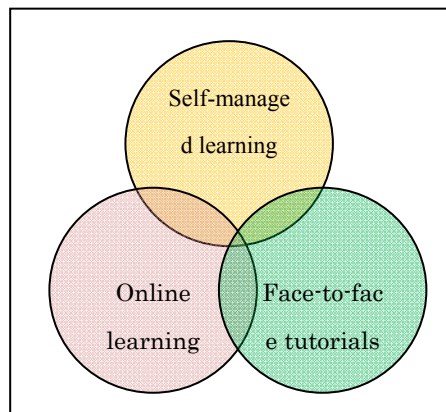

Figure 1: OUM Blended Pedagogy

(iii) Requirements of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency

To ensure a manageable programme the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) requires OUM to offer not more than 10 credit hours of academic load per semester to students in a blended pedagogy environment.

New collaboration, new requirements

All collaborations with MOE ended in September 2009 but in January 2011 MOE initiated a new programme called Bachelor of Teaching – Pre-School/ Primary Education (SMP-PPG) to upgrade the qualifications of more teachers. This new collaboration is an enhancement of the earlier SMP model aiming to fulfill the government's aspiration of having graduate teachers teaching in all government schools.

(i)   Soft skills and additional learning elements

One of the enhancements is the embedding of soft skills in the curriculum in line with the Ninth Malaysia Plan (Roselina Shakir, 2009) and the Tenth Malaysia Plan that aim to increase the number of graduate teachers in schools to near 90%. The Teacher Education Division (TED) which is under MOE, reinterpreted the soft-skills as consisting of 11 elements as shown in Figure 2.

1	Islamic and Asia Civilisation (TITAS)
2	1 Malaysia and Ethnic Relationship
3	Reading, Writing and Counting Skills
4	Upholding the Malay Language and Strengthening the English Language (MBMMBI)
5	Creativity and Innovation
6	Inclusive Education (Special Education)
7	English Proficiency/ Malay Communication
8	Arts in Education
9	1 Student 1 sport
10	Co-curriculum
11	Teachers' Professional Development

Figure 2: The 11 elements required by MOE

(ii)   Revision of curriculum

With this new requirement by MOE, OUM's Faculty of Education and Languages (FEL) set up a special committee to relook into the existing curriculum. This is to determine how far the current curriculum complies with the new requirements. The report from the committee confirms that not all elements required are present and some are vaguely represented in the current curriculum.

(iii)   Additional courses

The committee further recommended that additional 5 compulsory courses, 2 complementary courses and an English resource centre to be included in the curriculum to comply with the new MOE's requirements. These new courses translate into additional 15 credit hours (1 course = 3 credits). Out of the five courses; one was offered in the normal mode and another four are offered as fully online courses (Figure 3).

Distribution	Earlier SMP (Credits)	SMP-PPG (Credits)
Credit Transfer	9	12
University Courses	15	15
Core Courses	24	21 + 3 (new)
Major	36	36
Elective 1 & 2	36	36
Online courses	-	12 (new)
Total	120	135

Figure 3: Distribution of credit hours for SMP-PPG programme

New requirements, new solution, new innovation

As it is, the original SMP programme requires students to complete 120 credits within 12 semesters or 4 years to graduate. This translates into the maximum of 3 courses or 9 credits per semester which are within the limit allowed by MQA.

(i)   New Problem

However, with the new SMP-PPG programme the inclusion of the additional 5 courses into the curriculum would mean, OUM has:

    i.   exceeded the limit of academic load per semester set by MQA.

    ii.   extended the programme duration to over 12 semesters which is over the 4 years limit set by MOE.

    iii.   increased students' academic load which is burdensome to some.

(ii)   Solving the problems

A brainstorming session was initiated to find solution to these problems. The outcome was to offer 4 out of the 5 courses fully online. By doing this students'

learning space is extended virtually and they can learn anywhere and anytime they want. The idea is for them to control their own learning time by utilising the time pockets in their daily schedule. A parallel analogy of rocks, pebbles and sand can be used to explain how time can be utilised by the students in this environment. The rocks represent the students' work and family demands, the pebbles are their course demands and the sand are their new fully online course demands. For this to work, the faculty realises that the course design and assessment needed to be changed to suit the new courses environment.

(iii)   Principles and design of the learning space
Keeping the new course environment in mind, the team decided to design and build the course from ground up. Course contents were divided into smaller manageable chunks and in three different versions. Assignments were broken up into smaller activities and write-ups. Assessments were by portfolio and experience based. Interaction was provided via discussion forum and social media. Assignment submission was to be ongoing until the deadline and course duration was extended to more than one semester depending on the course demands.

An EPiC Solution

Since there was no current platform that can accommodate the 4 new courses, a portal called EPiC (Education Portal for Internet Courses) was created for this purpose. Its learning space was designed and built to accommodate the 4 new courses. Classroom setting was selected to provide familiarity and a renowned local cartoonist is engaged to inject fun into the portal (Figure 4).

Figure 4: EPiC Homepage

(i)   The learning space

This is where learning takes place. Pages for contents, activities, assignments, resources and forum can be found here. Course content can be up to ten topics (Figure 5) with each topic in 3 different versions: full text, abridged and multimedia.

Figure 5: The course content page

The activities and assignment pages are designed to complement each other. The assignments are broken down into smaller sections and presented as activities to the students. Completing all the activities actually provide students with the basic ground work for their assignment (Figure 6).
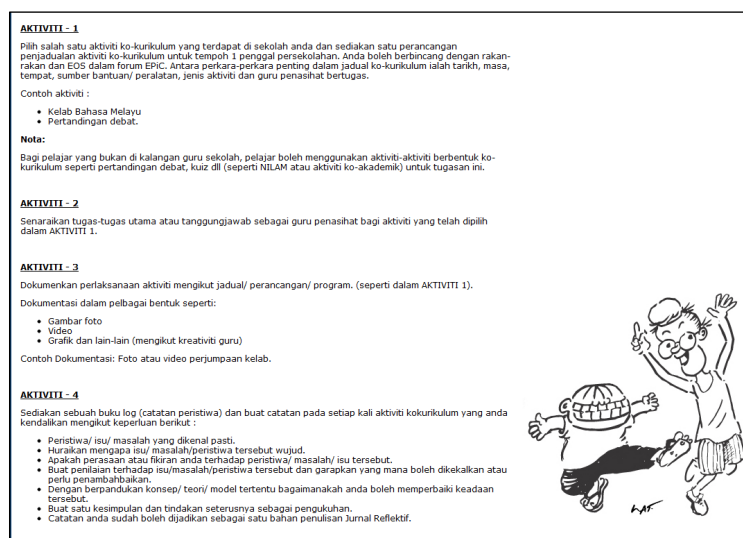
Figure 6: Activities page

The assignment page (Figure 7) is where students get their assignment question. The assignment question is structured to enable students to capture and document real-life activities at their workplaces. Here students are allowed to submit and resubmit their assignment/s as many times as they wish before the deadline. This is to enable their online supervisor to discuss and guide them in completing their assignment. The course coordinator (usually the subject matter expert) can also upload extra resources to the Resource page to further help students.

Figure 7: The assignment page

(ii)   The Forum

The absence of face-to-face interaction between students and their instructors would make students feel isolated (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). For this reason a discussion forum (Figure 8) is created. The forum is threaded and goes by course topic for easy referencing. Students will be able to hold discussion among themselves and/or with their online supervisors here.

Figure 8: Discussion forum

(iii)   The e-portfolio

To enable students to track and document all their submitted assignment, an electronic portfolio is created. All submitted work will automatically be archived in the portfolio (Figure 9) for future students' reference or download. It also doubles up as an interview portfolio showcasing all the work the students did at while undergoing this pprogramme.

Figure 9: Student's e-portfolio

(iv)   The Community

In online courses students need higher levels of motivation and they have to be more self-disciplined than students in traditional contact classes to be successful (Coombs-Richardson, 2007, Parise, 2000; Sampson, 2003). With this is mind, a community page was created on Google+ (Figure 10) to provide peer support and motivation as well as for non-academic and informal discussion and interaction for students, online supervisors/ subject matter experts and course coordinator.
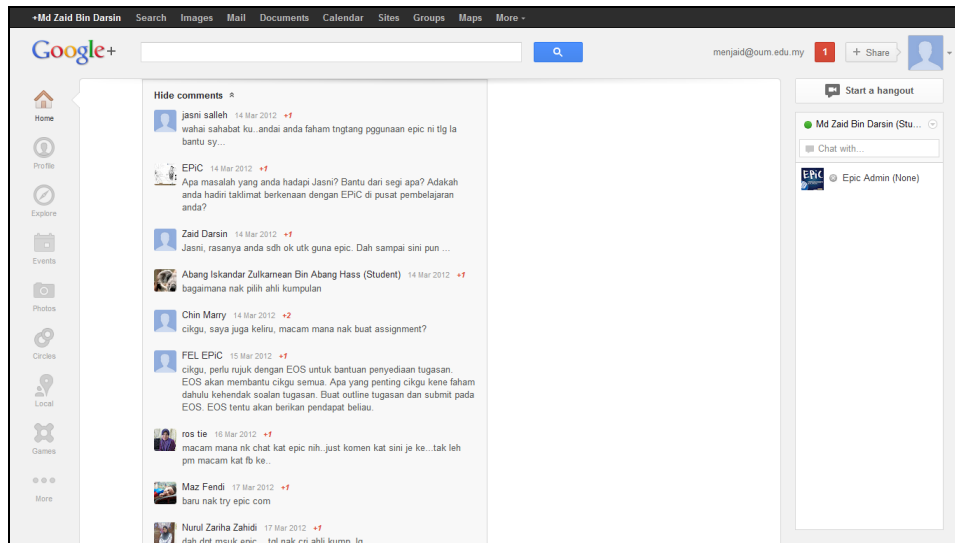
Figure 10: EPiC community page on Google+

Conclusion

OUM is humbled to be given a role in the nation's aspiration to be a developed country by 2020 and will go on supporting this aspiration in its capacity as an online university. To OUM educating the teachers is very important as this will in turn shape the generations to come. This is why OUM constantly finds ways to overcome constraints and policies set by the stakeholders with innovative solutions. Up to this date, the three earlier collaborations have produced more than 19,000 graduate teachers in various fields and have been placed in government schools all over the country. OUM hopes to continue to play its part in helping this nation to achieve a develop country status and would continue to find ways to add value to this programme. Being an online university OUM knows its contributions towards education are without geographical boundaries and it will continue to find innovative solutions to provide education for all.

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