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**Open, Distance and e-Learning:
Global Partnerships and Enhancing Opportunities for All**

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OPEN, DISTANCE AND E-LEARNING: GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

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Abstract

Education is universally acknowledged as a basic human right. The attainment of education directly influences a country's ability to participate in the global economy. It is thus unsurprising that higher education is unanimously considered the foundation for national development, and fundamentally needs to be made available and accessible to every individual. The notion of an accessible, affordable, equitable and quality education has often been linked to open, distance and e-learning (ODEL). Within the past several decades, ODEL has paved the way for an unprecedented number of people to access learning opportunities and obtain a university degree. While much has already been achieved in a relatively short time, the challenge at this juncture is to ensure that ODEL can overcome traditional obstacles and barriers to indeed make learning an opportunity for all. One of the mechanisms through which this can be achieved is global partnerships, where institutions can leverage on the openness and flexibility of ODEL to reach out to an even greater number of people and provide access to learning and education. This paper will explore the idea of education without boundaries as well as discuss partnerships in the context of various educational stakeholders, the advantages of partnerships and collaborations and how ODEL institutions can explore partnerships to create their own global brands. Finally, this paper will also describe how, as Malaysia's premier open university, Open University Malaysia (OUM) has been able to make its own mark in the international arena.

OPEN, DISTANCE AND E-LEARNING: GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS AND ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

1. INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION WITHOUT BORDERS

Education without borders is a paradigm that is intrinsically linked to open, distance and e-learning (ODEL), as the democratisation of education and the open access to learning opportunities are the very building blocks of ODEL. ODEL centres on the idea that education should be open, accessible, flexible and equitable to anyone who seeks it. The very conception of distance learning was founded on the growing need for skills upgrading and retraining as well as the technologies that make it possible to teach and learn at a distance (Daniel, 2002). Through many of the world's open universities, an unprecedented number of people, many who are considered non-traditional learners, have gained access to higher education (HE) and obtained university degrees. In both developed countries and less affluent nations alike, these individuals have diverse backgrounds – a majority are working adults, some are teachers, civil servants, members of the armed forces and there are also a notable number of senior citizens, remote or marginalised groups, and the physically disadvantaged.

Education without borders means that ideally, every individual has the right to democratised access and opportunity to pursue education. Within this sphere as well as in the context of national development, it is imperative that working adults have the opportunity to continue learning to upgrade their competencies and skills so that they can be more productive and contribute towards the country's economy. This relates to the increasingly important concept of lifelong learning; which itself has been inculcated and spread through ODEL. The flexibility and accessibility of ODEL academic programmes has allowed for many working adults to partake in HE or continuing education. This is particularly significant for developing countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, as it relates to knowledge capacity and human capital development as fundamental components in national progress.

Working adults have a very important role to play as breadwinners for their own families and also as valuable contributors to national economy. It is also widely recognised that

working adults make up the majority of ODEL learners who study on a part-time basis while juggling multiple personal and professional commitments. Many working adults seek learning opportunities as a way to upgrade their professional qualifications. As such, they are inclined to ODEL programmes that gravitate toward career-oriented or industry-driven subject matters, e.g. business administration, information technology and occupational safety and health. Many open universities also employ a blended or hybrid pedagogy; allowing learners to attend a minimal number of classes while doing most of their studying independently via an online platform, audio- and/or videocassettes, broadcasted television and radio programmes or other multimedia. This flexible learning arrangement is probably the most compelling reason behind ODEL's positive reputation with working adults.

The continued expansion of ODEL thus far indicates that open universities will continue to have an important role to play, not only in championing the concept of education without borders, but also in the enculturation of lifelong learning and encouraging working adults to continue learning as a way to upgrade their own qualifications as well as to boost the national economy. Within the last four decades, ODEL has proven to be a success, particularly in terms of the number of open universities worldwide and the uptake of academic programmes via ODEL. Many open universities, like Open University United Kingdom (OUUK), Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University and Open University Malaysia (OUM), are now known as “mega universities” (i.e. having enrolled more than 100,000 learners). Even more extensive institutions, like Indira Gandhi National Open University, Open University of China, Universitas Terbuka Indonesia (UTI) and Ramkhamhaeng University, have attained the extraordinary status of “super mega universities” upon enrolling more than 500,000 learners since their establishment.

At this juncture, where much has already been achieved in ODEL, the imperative is to truly realise education without borders, where an even greater number of people, regardless of background or location, can have access to education. ODEL and open universities need to explore ways to achieve this, especially in an international context where many countries are still lacking in various aspects of HE.

There is good potential for institutions in developing countries – such as in the ASEAN region where facilities, resources and university places are often markedly inadequate –

to form partnerships. The similarities shared in complicated circumstances and in culturally tight-knit regions can create an environment where the possibility of forging partnership is easier, as these institutions and countries often share the same educational goals and values.

The utilisation of information and communication technology (ICT) is one such strategy that has proven to be instrumental in any open university and can be leveraged on even further to enhance and improve the way ODEL programmes are delivered. Another strategy that is also gaining interest is global partnerships, where institutions can depend on the openness and flexibility of ODEL to reach potential learners abroad. As this paper will discuss, the concept of global partnerships is particularly valuable in ODEL and can indeed bring many benefits, both to open universities and potential learners.

2. GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS: IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STAKEHOLDERS

The idea of educational institutions forging global partnerships is clearly linked to the concept of internationalisation in HE. In Malaysia specifically, the focus on internationalisation is not new, having been initially encouraged during the restructuring of the national HE system in the 1990s, when the Government aimed to rebrand and promote Malaysian HE as a competitive and internationally accepted choice. Malaysia has been touted to become a regional hub of educational excellence with 200,000 international learners by 2020 (Hashim, 2012).

From the Government's perspective, this is a long-term plan that can yield considerable commercial benefits as well as liberalise HE in the country. Private HE institutions have responded to internationalisation by venturing overseas to set up branch campuses (like Limkokwing University of Creative Technology) or seeking partnership opportunities with foreign institutions (like OUM). As a result of these recent developments, Malaysia is said to be the leading emerging country in transnational HE. Of late, there has been a strong push for transnational HE in Malaysia. Albeit Malaysia is a relatively small country, it is a considerable trading nation, having placed in the top 20% of global trade enabled economies in 2012. The influence of the English language remains a tangible

force as well, where it continues to be a global *lingua franca* and is used as the main medium of instruction in a majority of Malaysian HE institutions.

From the learners' viewpoint, global partnerships between educational institutions creates the benefit of allowing them access to learning opportunities that may not be available or sufficient locally, especially if places in public institutions are limited, infrastructures are inadequate or fees are prohibitive. Malaysia has been able to attract international learners because local institutions are able to provide a wide range of academic programmes that are affordable and of reasonably high quality. Through global partnerships, learners in foreign countries have been able to enrol with Malaysian institutions like OUM and obtain Malaysian degrees that have many competitive advantages from the comfort of their own home countries.

This scenario is quite similar in other countries as well. One relevant example is Indonesia. Albeit the Indonesian HE system and policies differ to those of Malaysia, there are many chronological similarities, especially in the sense that Indonesian HE also experienced reform in the 1990s when the country, like Malaysia, faced some grave issues, e.g. unmet demand for quality, equity and participation, funding, internal efficiency, relevancy and governance (cited in Soejatminah, 2009). Indonesia has also expressed concern for international university rankings and enrolment of foreign learners – both reasons that spurred the initial interest in internationalisation in its neighbouring country. Indonesia has outlined its own policies regarding internationalisation of HE since 2003 (Soejatminah, *ibid.*), where it is seen as a way to improve national competitiveness.

Soejatminah (*ibid.*) has indicated that internationalisation is still in its developmental stages in Indonesia, although the Government has promised support through various programmes, including scholarships for international learners and encouraging local institutions to collaborate with foreign universities to offer twinning programmes or to promote learner and/or academic staff exchange. The nation's most established open university, UTI, can perhaps be described as one of the leading universities in this respect, where it has collaborated with many international institutions, including OUM and OUUK, in various areas, e.g. pedagogical research, curriculum development and sharing of best practices in quality assurance.

UTI, together with OUM and three other partnering institutions in Southeast Asia, also launched a collaborative Master of ASEAN Studies programme in October 2011; which involves joint curriculum development, shared learning materials, resources and platforms. Both countries, having had similar experiences and histories in HE, exhibit a similar approach in internationalisation, whereby forming partnerships has been given emphasis as one of its main strategies. Given the similarities, ODEL is likely to play an important role in advancing this cause.

3. ADVANTAGES OF GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

The impact of HE internationalisation at a national level is quite evident in countries like Malaysia, where numerous public and private institutions have been established; new study arrangements have been created; as well as more stringent regulatory and quality assurance (QA) procedures have been put in place. These have been crucial in upgrading the Malaysian brand, and have generated interest to attract foreigners to study locally. Economic benefits are also evident. The average amount spent by each foreign learner on tuition fees and accommodation each year (i.e. about USD9,000 in total) is a significant source of income for the country.

In general, collaborating in the HE context has produced several distinct benefits, particularly in the academic standpoint. Some of the most significant include:

- Access to courses and programmes that are unavailable or inadequate in learners' home countries;
- Improved research and development as well as quality of faculty, teaching and learning;
- Improved opportunity for mobility (either of programmes, learners, or faculty members);
- Improved opportunity to participate in international networks, e.g. for curriculum development, policy-making, QA, et cetera;
- Better engagement with stakeholders and similar institutions for national, regional and global issues; and

- Opportunity for sharing and exchange of expertise for institutional improvement in various areas, e.g. policies, governance, support services, QA, et cetera.

In the context of ODEL and open universities, forging collaborations has clearly given rise to a greater concern for quality, especially in terms of curricula and programme delivery. Collaborations create opportunities for benchmarking and sharing of best practices, and this is encouraged further by international and regional bodies such as the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), ASEAN QA Network (AQAN), and the International Network for QA Agencies in HE (INQAAHE). In recent years, QA in ODEL has shifted from a provider- to learner-centred focus, and covering various themes such as staff performance evaluation and foreign accreditation (Jung, 2007). The growing attention on learner services is also indicative of the concern for quality, and many open universities are already looking into enhancing these services with ICT. The quality of learner services, including tutoring, is now also regularly assessed.

Another excellent advantage that has come from global partnerships, especially in ODEL, is the accessibility, affordability and flexibility enjoyed by learners. Ensuring the continued and open access to learning opportunities is a cornerstone in ODEL, and in many ways, collaborations between educational institutions have resulted in better opportunities for more people, especially women and marginalised groups, to obtain a university education. Many open universities, especially through large providers like the mega and super mega universities, have been able to prove that ODEL can indeed be a feasible HE pathway through its leverage on ICT to combine flexibility, quality, low cost and high volume needed for greater access to HE.

A learner-friendly delivery method that often employs a blended pedagogy and focuses on e-learning as the central component in teaching and learning has led to two very significant things. Firstly, it has thrown the doors wide open for a greater fraction of the community to learn; and secondly, the e-learning platform allows virtually limitless room for innovation that can further promote the democratisation of HE. In the specific context of global partnerships, many open universities, including OUM, has proven that ODEL academic programmes can be run internationally with tuition fees that can be adjusted to suit local conditions. This is particularly beneficial for partnering institutions in less affluent countries in Asia and Africa.

The aforementioned leverage on ICT needs to be stressed as an integral part of any ODEL delivery, whether locally or through a global partnership. ICT has allowed for open universities to share expertise and exchange information, including learning management systems, curricula and delivery approaches. ICT is also an enabling factor that allows global partnerships to take place without involving extensive physical mobility in the part of the provider institution. This inevitably involves the use of Internet technology, where local penetration rates and infrastructures need to be considered and can be a significant enabling factor. As an illustration, in Asia, Internet penetration rates vary widely, although countries like South Korea (at 82.5%), Japan (79.5%), Taiwan (75.4%), Singapore (75.0%), Hong Kong (74.5%) and Malaysia (60.7%) have recorded some of the highest rates in the region.

The potential for institutions in these countries to collaborate by leveraging on ICT and Internet technology is indeed great. Through the use of ICT, one of the best mechanisms where collaborations can be forged is for one institution to work with a local partner in the home country. As will be illustrated in the next section, OUM has explored this strategy for several years and has made considerable strides in this endeavour.

4. OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA AS AN EXAMPLE

4.1 OUM's Global Partnership Initiative

OUM started in August 2001 with only 753 learners. Now more than a decade later, the university offers 52 programmes at various levels of study, with a cumulative intake over 120,000 and a total number of graduates that has surpassed 41,000. As Malaysia's premier open university, OUM has been able to stamp its mark in Malaysia and globally in a short span of time. Further growth and expansion lies not only within Malaysia, but there is much to gain from global partnerships as well.

OUM's approach to forging global partnerships involves collaborating with local partners, where the foreign institution operates as OUM's overseas learning centre. Whilst the partner is free to enrol learners and conduct all teaching and learning activities, OUM

provides learning materials, sets assessment questions, endorses marking schemes, examination results and teaching staff. This arrangement has proven to be feasible for both parties as OUM does not interfere with regular day-to-day operations, instead providing these institutions with sufficient autonomy whilst still ensuring quality by monitoring the relevant processes. OUM also gives technological support, usually in the form of subscription to OUM's learning management system (known as myVLE or My Virtual Learning Environment) and the provision of electronic learning materials.

OUM is constantly looking for new partners who share its ideals as well as searching for ways to improve upon existing partnerships. OUM's main clientele comprises working adults and part-time learners. Commonly, Malaysian private universities cater to full-time first-degree learners. The international enrolment for these institutions thus involves foreign learners who live and study in Malaysia throughout the duration of their programmes. OUM is unique in that it has devised its internationalisation initiative by locating all activities overseas.

Over the past seven years or so, OUM has forged partnerships with numerous foreign educational institutions across different regions (Figure 1). These include:

1. Arab Open University, Bahrain;
2. University of Science and Technology, Yemen;
3. Villa College, The Maldives;
4. Accra Institute of Technology, Ghana;
5. International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka;
6. Eszterházy Károly College, Hungary;
7. Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam;
8. JR School and Athena International Centre for Excellence, Mauritius;
9. SIMAD University, Somalia; and
10. Graduate School of Management, Sri Lanka.

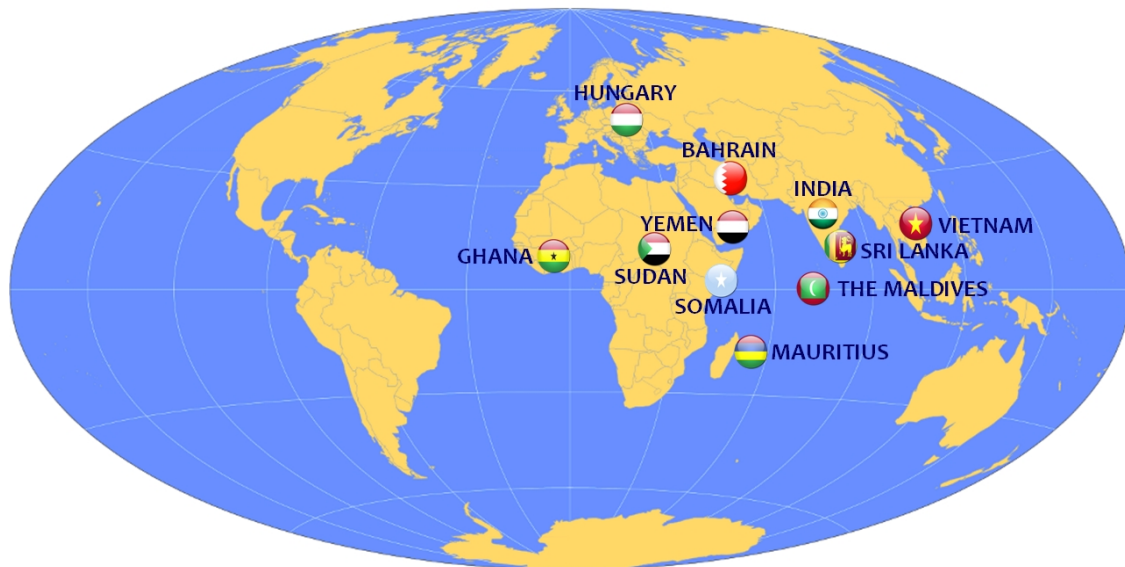


Figure 1: OUM's International Presence

With the exception of collaborations with the International Institute of Health Sciences (that focuses only on Nursing Science); and Villa College (that primarily involves Bachelor of Education programmes), the other institutions principally offer postgraduate programmes in the fields of Business Administration and Information Technology.

The collaborations are based on mutual benefits, where, apart from the offering of academic programmes, both parties gain from:

- The sharing of ICT facilities;
- Cooperation in curriculum development;
- The training and exchange of academic staff;
- Collaboration in research activities and publications; and
- The sharing of learning materials and support services.

The following table illustrates OUM's international learner intake and graduates as at November 2012.

Table 1: Cumulative Intakes and Graduates of OUM International Learners

Institution	Cumulative Intake	Graduates
Arab Open University, Bahrain	734	3
University of Science and Technology, Yemen	553	51
Villa College, The Maldives	1,784	61
Accra Institute of Technology, Ghana	516	-
International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka	62	-
Eszterházy Károly College, Hungary	25	-
Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam	562	-
SIMAD University, Somalia	55	-
Graduate School of Management, Sri Lanka	28	-
Total	4,319	115

OUM also conducts training programmes and short courses at Professional Certificate, Professional Diploma and Executive Master's levels via OUM International and the Institute for Professional Development. These programmes range from Human Resource Management, Language and Culture, to Public Health Management and even Freight Logistics. The countries that have been involved in these types of programmes are:

1. Bangladesh;
2. Brunei Darussalam;
3. India;
4. Japan;
5. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia;
6. The Maldives;
7. Sri Lanka; and
8. Sudan.

4.2 OUM's Enabling Factors

OUM's internationalisation initiative has been primarily driven by its own unique needs. Having been established as a private institution but owned by a consortium of 11 of Malaysia's public universities, OUM does not receive public funding and must independently seek ways to be self-sustaining and to generate its own income. This necessity is what compelled OUM to venture into international operations.

Leveraging on past experiences has indeed proven to be an important factor for OUM. We have come to realise that successfully building a global presence calls for many tangible and subjective requisites, e.g. diplomacy, careful planning, implementation of a concrete business model, understanding of local cultures, as well as building a strong rapport with the management team of the partnering institution. Both institutions must work together from the very start to develop a matrix of responsibilities that details each of their respective roles in the offering of OUM's academic programmes. This is critical to ensure that all processes are executed properly according to set rubrics as well as to minimise any misunderstanding during the execution of OUM programmes.

It is also important to establish a positive relationship. An effort to understand the culture and work ethics of a prospective partner must be made during the early parts of negotiation. This is indeed a significant component of any relationship which is built to last, strengthened further with the commitment of the chief executives of both partners. A bond of understanding and close relationship between them will definitely be translated down to every level, including the Deans and faculty members.

Such a relationship is crucial to creating an environment that is conducive for the staff of both partners to work together and ensure a sustainable collaboration. With a sustainable relationship, both partners can ascertain that a learner-centred approach will always remain a guiding principle. At the same time, government support for both partnering institutions is also pertinent so that both will feel the comfort of such support, thus paving the way for a better collaborative environment between the two partners.

Cost is another crucial factor to ensure success in this partnership. In order to present OUM's academic programmes as an attractive and competitive option, it is necessary that the corresponding tuition fees are attractive and competitive as well. It would be vital to note the economic standing and living cost of any foreign country to ascertain that the tuition fees are affordable and within the means of the target market in that country. With a motto of "University for All", OUM strives to make its programmes affordable to all its learners, whether they are local or otherwise. OUM leverages on corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a means to control costs. Its CSR concept involves the provision of affordable tuition fees, easy payment schemes, loans,

bursaries, scholarships as well as incentives for special groups such as senior citizens and the physically disabled.

As part of its QA measure, OUM also conducts regular on-site audits at each of its overseas learning centre. Such QA audits, performed by OUM's faculty members, will involve the inspection of various operations and review of the relevant documents, e.g. learner files, assessment questions, answer scripts and files of the teaching staff. This has been an essential exercise that allows OUM and its international partner to evaluate the progress of the collaboration, identify and solve problems. Similarly, constant communication and consultation are also important in ensuring a successful collaboration. Due to the fact that these learning centres are located abroad, OUM and its partnering institution must be in contact with each other at all times not merely to keep the communication lines open, but also to iron out issues together.

OUM's learning management system, myVLE, has also been a central contributing factor for global partnerships. Having been adopted by several public and private universities in Malaysia, OUM has been able to capitalise on its experience and in-house expertise to market the system internationally, where most of our international partners fully adopt myVLE as their learning management system. Each myVLE portal utilised in these different institutions consists of similar functions used at OUM, with an integrated system that has been developed to provide ease-of-use to the learners. Through myVLE, OUM learners are also able to access the university's collections in the Digital Library, regardless of where they may be or which institution they are enrolled into. This applies to all learners, including those located overseas.

The success of this strategy in global partnerships can be attributed to the continuous effort made by OUM as well as each of its partnering institution. OUM has been fortunate to have collaborated with institutions of excellent standing that share the university's values and are able to synergise with OUM to provide the best possible services to these international learners. OUM's focus on a learner-centred approach and providing quality education has been an important strategy as well; one that has played a considerable role in shaping the institution's global brand. This can also be considered as an example where global partnerships have been able to create new avenues for education and truly realise learning opportunities for all.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

To ensure that every individual has the right and access to learning opportunities is to truly realise the concept of education without borders. Across many countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia, this initiative has been greatly aided by ODEL. By leveraging on ICT, the openness and flexibility of ODEL, open universities have been able to venture into global partnerships as a means of marketing academic programmes to a global audience. This has proven to be a very feasible and practical strategy in internationalisation, and is able to make full use of the various advantages of ODEL, including the delivery of high quality academic programmes at a low cost, while still giving its learners, who are mainly working adults, a comfortable degree of freedom and independence in their studies.

OUM's own outreach in global partnerships within the past eight years has resulted in the establishment of several learning centres located abroad and an enrolment of almost 5,000 learners thus far – an achievement that we consider unique as not many other Malaysian HE institutions have ventured into internationalisation via this approach. The university hopes to continue to enhance this outreach by forging new collaborations with other institutions in different regions and progressively build an international presence of reputable standing, thus elevating OUM and Malaysia to greater heights in the provision of educational services.

It will be unsurprising to see that global partnerships will continue to be a focal point for many institutions and countries in the years to come. Thus, open universities and other like institutions will do well to leverage on ODEL to boost in this endeavour. This can certainly make a clear difference in the drive towards enhancing opportunities for all.

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