Widening Cross-border Participation: Building ODL Communities Through Internationalisation at Open University Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

With the new challenges of a global knowledge-based economy, it is essential to strengthen a nation's workforce. A knowledgeable, productive and competent workforce is a pre-requisite for the elevation of the country's human resources in order to meet the challenges of information and communication technology and knowledge explosions. Continuous upgrading through education and training guarantees the successful development of the workforce and the nation's knowledge-based economy in a global environment. Flexibility and accessibility of technology-based learning simplifies cross-border education among countries. Learning has now become mobile and more accessible, at a reasonable cost. This paper reports how Open University Malaysia (OUM) employs open and distance learning (ODL) as an approach to provide and expand education, capacity building and human resource development opportunities through cross-border education. This paper has resulted in additional insight relating to the effectiveness of the ODL techniques used. It analyses OUM's networking strategies and collaborative efforts from an international perspective.

INTRODUCTION

By observing the innovative uses of communication and information technology (ICT) in ODL, one cannot help but notice the flexibility in geographical boundaries. This allows ODL providers to create new educational opportunities for people seeking knowledge across borders. Awareness of the changing nature of the global economy and global labour market has created a growing demand for international education. Of course, the idea of international education itself is not new. There has always been international mobility of students and researchers in search of new knowledge and training when this is not available within the nation (Rizvi, F; Engel, L; Nandyala, A; Rufkowski, D; Sparks, J, 2005).

The strategy often applied by ODL providers is to offer educational programmes to international learners via institutional networking. This involves collaborations with higher educational institutions or governmental and non-governmental entities in other

countries. The programmes often target international development projects and courses that capitalise on the provider's expertise, uniqueness and commitment to quality. ODL providers integrate their ideas and efforts to build alliances with international counterparts to offer their programmes to global learners. This is evident among open and distance education providers as mentioned by Jung (2005). Findings in various studies have also indicated that working adults are able to improve their socioeconomic status in the society through ODL (Gaba, 2007; Wong, 2008).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY – OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

Open University Malaysia (OUM) has successfully ventured into various collaborative efforts to provide education for human resources both local and abroad. Initially in 1997, the Committee of Vice Chancellors of Malaysian Public Institutions of Higher Learning (IPTA) recommended the setting up of a multimedia consortium to the Malaysian Ministry of Education, The proposal was approved and a one-stop centre to coordinate all the open and distance learning programmes offered by the 11 Malaysian public universities was set up under the consortium, which was called Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations (METEOR) Sdn Bhd. METEOR is jointly owned by the universities. The objectives of METEOR are to:

(1) Operate as a commercial entity in the ICT industry through research and development.

(2) Support and advance the development of local ICT and to facilitate ICT transfer from the international community with regard to multimedia application in education and within the context of lifelong learning.

(3) Collaborate and optimize the use of existing resources of the universities, government and industry in the interest of generating a pool of skilled ICT professionals.

(4) Create, develop and deliver high-quality multimedia-based open and distance education programmes to meet the demand for cost-effective tertiary education.

Unitem Sdn Bhd, one of METEOR's four subsidiaries, was set up with the objective of providing quality and affordable open and distance learning programmes through Open University of Malaysia (OUM), the country's seventh private university. While its main campus is in Kuala Lumpur, OUM has over 61 learning centres throughout Malaysia. In August 2001, the first intake of 753 adults who wanted to pursue certificate, diploma and degree courses through ODL was conducted in Malaysia. In March 2002, the first batch of teachers numbering 2,700 enrolled in various ODL degree programmes in education under OUM's collaboration with the Malaysian Ministry of Education.

In addition, OUM also offers an array of ODL programmes through its collaboration locally with Malaysia's Ministry of Defence (namely, the Royal Malaysian Air Force and the Royal Malaysian Military Force), retailer Aeon Jusco, as well as internationally to Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Kingdom of Bahrain, Yemen, Singapore, Vietnam, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, etc. The total enrolment of OUM students currently stands at over 81,000, excluding those who participate in short-term non-credit bearing programmes.

ODL has taken a completely new status as reflected in its wider acceptance and legitimate accreditation. Wider participation in ODL gives the learners the opportunity

and flexibility to continue learning from any location without disrupting their work, family and personal commitments, an attractive option for working people to upgrade their knowledge and competency. This also applies to international students who study via personalised mode at OUM or at various institutions affiliated via collaboration with OUM.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF OUM PROGRAMMES

OUM International

The launching of OUM International on 30 June 2008 further emphasizes the need to focus on widening participation by offering international programmes that consist of both credit-bearing programmes as well as development projects, customised training and fellowship programmes. OUM International has successfully managed extensive consultancies and customised short-term training programmes, which includes a full range of support services, on request. OUM International has managed more than 50 successful projects in education, public administration, environmental education, financial management, health and IT.

These international projects are facilitated by appropriate personnel selected from the 11 public universities, as well as private and public sectors within the country for their expertise, cultural sensitivity and experience. Associate consultants from overseas attached to OUM are also roped in accordingly to implement these programmes.

OUM International is a registered training provider with the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, UNESCO/UNDP and the European Union. Among the public sector organizations that OUM International has worked with include the following:

1. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Education and Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka (EU)

2. Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of the Maldives (World Bank)

3. Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Bangladesh (World Bank)

4. Ministry of Education and Higher Education Sri Lanka (World Bank)

5. National Institute of Education, Sri Lanka (EU)

6. Ministry of Home Affairs and Environment, Maldives (UNDP)

7. Open University Sri Lanka (ADB)

8. Universitas Kutai Kartanegara, Indonesia (Self-funded)

9. Bangladesh Open University (ADB)

10. Airlangga University, Indonesia (ADB)

11. Technical and Vocational Training Corporation, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (GOTEVOT) (Self-funded)

12. Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia

13. Ministry of Labour, Saudi Arabia

14. Air Emirates

OUM has also entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with several universities and institutions in the world to offer continuous professional development (CPD). The list includes:

1.   Universitas Riau, Indonesia

2.   Universite de La Rochellem, France

3.   Ta'aheel, Syria

4.   Paul Cezanne University, Aix-Marseille III, France

5.   Universitas Terbuka Indonesia

6.   Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

7.   CMS Education Group, Jakarta, Indonesia

8.   SpringBoard Asia Sdn Bhd, UK

9.   Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

10. University of South Africa (UNISA)

11. Universitas Widyatama, Indonesia

12. Universitas Ibn Khaldun Bogor – Indonesia

13. University of Science & Technology, Yemen

14. Eszterhazy Karoly College, Hungary

15. Delta Academy of Science, Egypt

16. Universitas Budi Luhur (UBL), Indonesia

17. Open University of Sudan

18. ISTEDOD Foundation of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

19. Open University Bangladesh

20. Korea National Open University

21. Shaheed Behesti Medical University of Sciences, Iran

The projects above mark another milestone in creating learning communities via ODL by OUM.

Postgraduate Collaborations between OUM and Foreign Counterparts

Several collaborative partnerships have emerged to meet the growing demand for postgraduate studies via ODL. Such partnerships include regional and international collaboration, governmental as well as private, and for-profit collaboration, with other ODL institutions and international organizations. OUM has adopted ICT as a supplementary mode of instruction and a way of improving support services such as e-tutoring, online mark entry system, one-stop online student services, online discussion forum and digital library.

Total e-assessment was adopted by OUM in January 2009 with the birth of a new postgraduate programme, Master in Instructional Design and Technology (MIDT).

Proctored online assessment has been successfully carried out in this fully online programme. Though assignments are submitted and assessed online, the final examinations have always required the learner to be present. In MIDT's case, a proctor is appointed to oversee the online examination held at designated venues where the students take the online examination. A 100% online examination is a strict no-no in OUM, in compliance with the regulation set by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA).

A first in Malaysia, MIDT is a breakthrough in the local education setting. This unique programme is being taught by academicians from around the world including Canada, the United States, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Denmark, Netherlands, Australia, the Middle East, United Kingdom and Malaysia. Twenty-one learners from more than 15 countries are currently enrolled in this programme. Although they are located far away from each other, they share a close bond by working together on joint assignment projects. MIDT is an example of openness to new ideas (Peters, 2001). Other than OUM's home-grown e-learning tool called the Learning Management System (myLMS) which serves to connect geographically dispersed learners with the University (Rohaizak & Santhi, 2008), other online social networking platforms such as e-mail, blog, Skype, Facebook, YouTube and Wikis pave the way for communication among learners and academics.

Apart from MIDT, OUM's other postgraduate programmes have been offered through four institutions: Arab Open University in the Kingdom of Bahrain (AOU), University of Science and Technology Yemen (USTY), Universitas Nasional Riau Indonesia (UNRI) and Trent Global Education Group Singapore (TEG). OUM's Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Information Technology (MIT) and PhD in Business Administration (PhD BA) are offered to AOU. Similarly, MBA and MIT are also offered in USTY. In UNRI, Master of Management (MM) is offered and in TEG, PhD BA is offered. In the pipeline for 2009, is MBA to be offered to the Tea Association of Vietnam. Other collaborations for 2009 include countries like Iran and Ghana.

Table 1 below shows the numbers for three categories of students:

(a)   Postgraduate students who are pursuing their studies via programmes held in joint collaboration with foreign educational institutions;

(b)   Students who apply individually from all over the world and are registered as personalised learners to pursue their postgraduate programmes; and

(c)   MIDT students who are from all over the world.

Table 1 also shows the postgraduate programme being pursued by these foreign students between late 2003 until July 2009.

Table 1: Number of Foreign Students Pursuing Masters and Doctorate Programmes in OUM from 2003–2009

Learning Centre	Total No. of Students		Graduated	
	Masters	Ph.D	Masters	Ph.D
A. Via collaboration:				
USTY, Yemen	209	–	10	–
AOU, Bahrain (w.e.f. Jan 2005)	666	93	152	–
UNRI, Indonesia (w.e.f. May 2005)	4	–	3	–
TEG, Singapore (w.e.f. Nov 2007)	–	4	–	–
TOTAL	879	97	165	
B. Others, via personalised mode: (w.e.f. Sept 2003)				
Canada	4	2	–	–
Indonesia	1	–	–	–
Singapore	3	2	–	–
Myanmar	3	–	1	–
Yemen	1	–	–	–
Jordan	1	–	–	–
United Arab Emirates	–	2	–	–
C. Via Master in Instructional Design and Technology (MIDT) – 100% online	21			
TOTAL	13	6	1	–
GRAND TOTAL (as of July 2009)	913	103	166	–

Students who have quit the Ph.D and Master's programmes are excluded from the above table. Reasons for quitting are manifold – some are personal in nature, while others are programme related (Rahmah and Kuldip, 2008).

Undergraduate Collaborations between OUM and Foreign Counterparts

The collaboration between OUM and Villa College in Maldives marks another milestone in the internationalisation of OUM's programmes. Over 170 learners from Maldives enrolled in OUM's bachelor's degree courses in business administration, information technology and education (administration) which started in July 2008. This pioneer project by OUM for its overseas undergraduates was developed based on the postgraduate model whereby the assignment and exam questions are moderated by OUM faculty members, the teaching staff appointed are endorsed by OUM, the learning materials are transmitted via soft copies, the student admission criteria are based on OUM policies and procedures and the yearly quality assurance audits are conducted by OUM.

| Programme	First Cohort (July 2008)	Second Cohort (Feb 2009)	Total
BIT	23	37	60
BBA	24	33	57
BEEA	29	28	57
Grand Total (as of May 2009)			174

BIT   = Bachelor in IT

BBA   = Bachelor in Business Administration

BEEA = Bachelor in Education (Educational Administration)

BLENDED LEARNING FOR COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP VIA ODL

Collaborative partnerships with other institutions are beneficial as these can improve the quality of developing programmes (Jung, 2005). Other benefits of such collaborations are income generation for both collaborating partners, widening the participation of international learners as well as entry into new markets at the regional and international levels. In addition, resources too can be shared by distributing costs among partners while expanding services to global learners. All OUM programmes are taught in English, except the Bachelor in Islamic Studies which is taught in the Malay Language. Textbooks, course guides, modules and e-learning materials are provided for all courses. In addition, myLMS is provided as an online learning support in a virtual classroom environment. Here, the instructor stimulates discussion to enhance learners' thinking skills and support learners in increasing ownership of learning. It is highly interactive as well as collaborative. Figure 1 shows how OUM learners study i.e. via blended pedagogy that includes three modes: self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorials/seminars and online interactions using myLMS (Santhi, 2008).
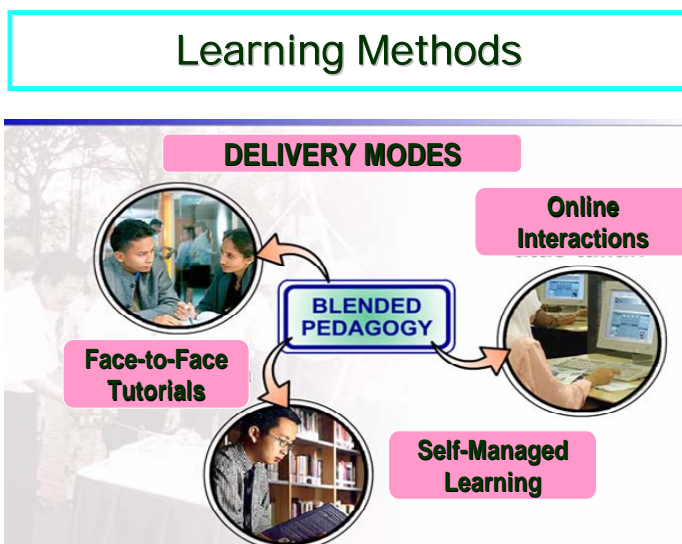
Figure 1: OUM's Learning Methods

According to Gray (2006), blended learning, which combines a variety of delivery methods, can be a powerful e-learning solution that creates superior learning experiences and in the long term establishes a competitive edge for the provider. In OUM, all academic programmes are delivered through this pedagogy of learning as it combines a variety of media (refer to Figure 2). Figure 2 provides a clearer description of the three methods involved in the blended pedagogy that takes learning beyond the walls of a traditional classroom (Santhi, 2008).
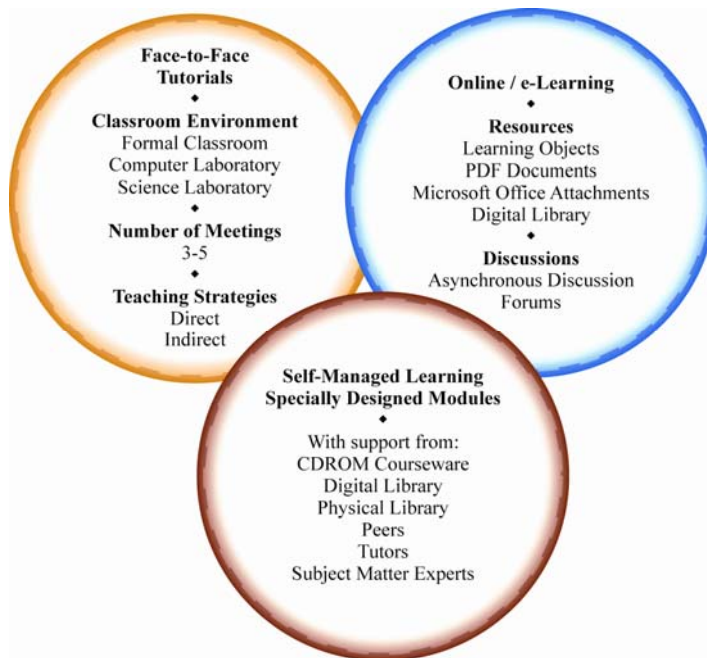
Figure 2: OUM's Blended Pedagogy in Detail

OUM has acquired the status of a reputable ODL provider in the global arena as portrayed by the list of international programmes and projects which have been conducted since it was established. These educational partnerships have contributed to the development of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, as well as short-term projects in the ODL context and helped shape current ODL systems among collaborating partners. Although the contexts between Malaysia and the foreign counterparts differ in many areas, collaborating partners could adapt the procedures and practices if necessary. Regulated quality assurance audits are conducted by OUM to gauge collaborating partners' adherence to the stipulated quality processes. These critical documents support quality practices and propagation of a quality work culture among staff and management. Education service providers who plan to be in the market for the long term cannot afford to offer shoddy service or they will lose clients. These institutions can adhere to quality assurance processes and audits (Shackleton, 2003). Thus far, collaborators have shown a high level of compliance with the stipulated quality processes, as indicated by a recent quality assurance audit conducted on all of OUM's international partners.

CONCLUSION

ODL is popularly known to play an important role in offering undergraduate programmes to the local market. But the effective technology-mediated environment and quality policy and practices offered by OUM widens the University's networking further to include global partners. To sustain growth by continuously participating in new opportunities, OUM capitalizes on its proven expertise in handling international learners by promoting the OUM brand internationally and increasing its significant role in both postgraduate and undergraduate studies as well as short term projects and fellowship programmes. This paper has attempted to discuss selected international collaborations as carried out by OUM in meeting the emerging needs of global learners. This paper is deemed valuable for all ODL providers who are optimistic of exploring the growth opportunities of international collaborations. Successful international co-operations not only strengthen but also deepen the partnership between institutions, which could lead to enormous economic growth and development (APEC Report, 2009). Some governments cannot, or choose not to, provide all the resources needed to educate their population. Countries such as Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea have more than two-thirds of tertiary education privately provided (CIE, 2008).

Though progress has been made via internationalisation, there still exist challenges of building human capital and ODL quality assurance and its relevance to the workplace (Mukerji & Jammel, 2008). Governments, employers, faculties, researchers, students and communities have legitimate concerns over what students learn and how they are judged to have learnt (Jung, 2007). It is essential that an analytical study be undertaken by designers of ODL global courseware in order to develop an ODL networked collaborative framework. This single mechanism for benchmarking imports and exports of ODL programmes and projects can ensure that ODL across borders meets quality standards as well as contributes to a nation's growth and development.

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