

Openness: What It Means to the Support Unit Staff

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ABSTRACT

In responding to the call for openness in a digitized world, the University of the Philippines Open University continues to innovate from printed academic texts to other forms of media, and expand beyond its borders while staying cognizant of its open and distance e-Learning ideals. In embracing the philosophy of openness in fulfilling its mandate of widening access to quality higher education in the context of open and distance e-Learning, the alignment of the mission and vision of the University of the Philippines Open University's administration with its workforce awareness is imperative to sustain an environment wherein learners can thrive. Generally, the results of the focused group discussion with the 32 University of the Philippines Open University support unit staff revealed that they had a good perception of what openness is. Their perceptions on their office's role in the development of open and distance e-Learning, research thrusts, and public/community service were also aligned with the University of the Philippines Open University administration's vision and mission.

INTRODUCTION

The historical reconstruction of *openness* in education revealed that it is a technological, social, cultural and economic phenomenon (Peter & Deimann, 2013). It is impacting the teaching, curriculum, research, textbooks and policies in education (Wiley & Green, 2012).

The term *open* or *openness* started with the establishment of Open University of United Kingdom (OUUK) in 1969, which opened up higher education by the removal of all academic pre-requisites for admission, and through operating at a distance. For the next thirty years, the dimensions of openness will also include *open curricula* aside from *open admissions* and *distance learning at scale* which OUUK and other mega universities are already practicing. The enormous educational potentials offered by the Internet and the digital technologies will make it possible for open universities to open

up more by taking advantage of open educational resources, open source software, and open access publishing (Daniel, 2011).

In the educational context, open(ness) is defined by Peter and Deimann (2013) as “the watermark for the fast growing number of learning materials and associated platforms and practices from a variety of institutions and individuals”.

Open and Distance eLearning (ODEL) at the UPOU

Since the establishment of University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) in 1995, its mission is to widen access to quality higher education. The emphasis of UPOU's *openness* then was the delivery of its academic programs through distance education using stand-alone printed modules supplemented by audio-visual materials, and a once a month face-to-face tutorial session.

With the advancement in computer technologies and the Internet, UPOU adopted online teaching and learning in 2001, and now offers its courses 100% online, and had also started its own massive open online courses (MOOCs). Such developments ushered UPOU to the potentials of open and distance e-learning (ODEL) in making quality education more accessible, and enhancing the learning experience of its students.

According to Alfonso (2012, p.5), “ODEL is a world view that draws from the features and affordances provided by open learning, distance education, and e-learning... infused with values that underpin the university... together, all these elements are embedded and facilitated by networked and communication technologies... The interweaving of these components can bring about social transformation”.

UPOU Support Unit

As mandated by the University of the Philippines (UP) Board of Regents (1995), the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (OVCAA) shall assist the Chancellor in coordinating and monitoring curricular, instructional, research, extension, library and other academic programs in the UPOU. The offices/units under OVCAA are the Office of the University Registrar (OUR), and the Office of the Academic Support & Instructional Services (OASIS). OVCAA also supervises the UPOU Learning Centers (LCs), and the UPOU Library. The key function of these offices/units are:

OUR: provides the administrative support services to UPOU students from admission to graduation. It is the office that the students deal with on a regular basis throughout their stay in the university.

OASIS: provides services such as planning, development, evaluation, and revision of academic courses as well as training of faculty and staff in course development.

LCs: are the venue for students' proctored examinations, enrollment, submission of assignments, general orientation (for new students), and occasional face-to-face study sessions. LCs also provides limited library services, information on UPOU's programs/course offerings, scholarship programs available, etc.

UPOU Support Unit Timeline

Figure 1 shows the timeline of the UPOU Support Unit from 1995 to 2013. The reorganizations that transpired in UPOU and the advancements in the use of ICTs and Internet in higher education brought academic and administrative changes in how the UPOU support unit operates, particularly in course delivery (Figure 2) and format of course materials (Figure 3).

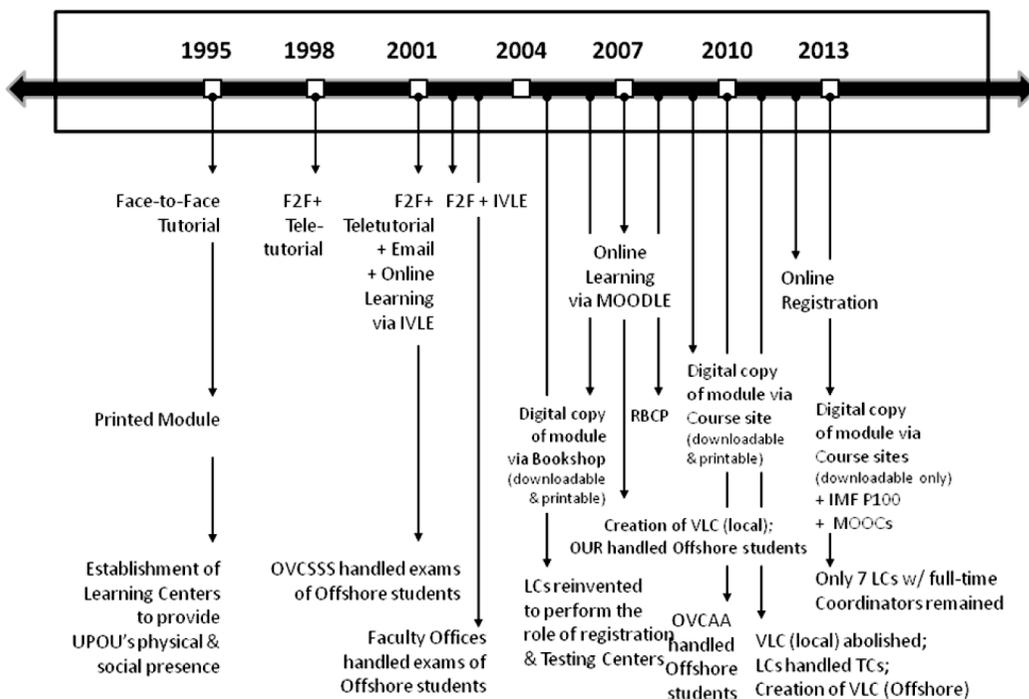


Figure 1: UPOU support unit timeline from 1995 to 2013

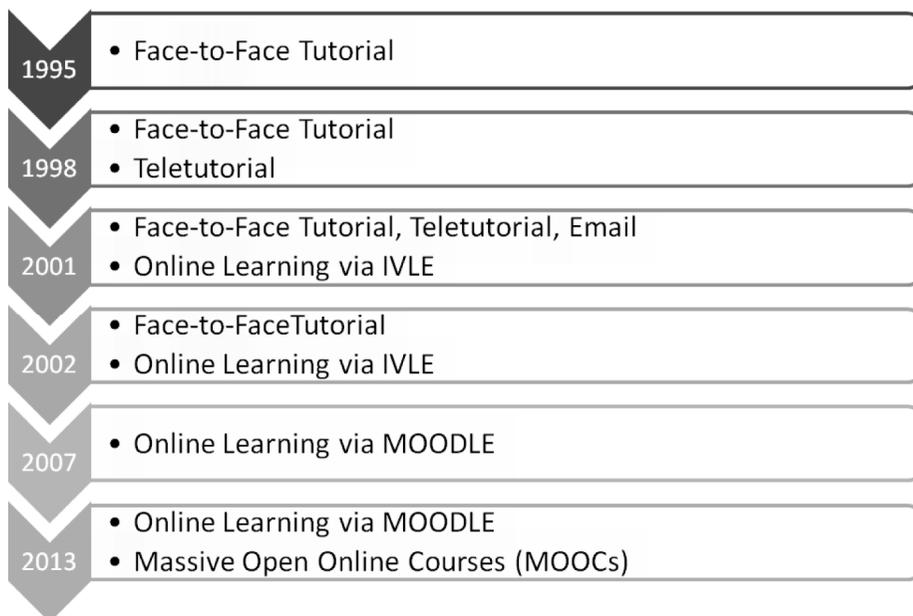


Figure 2: Changes in course delivery

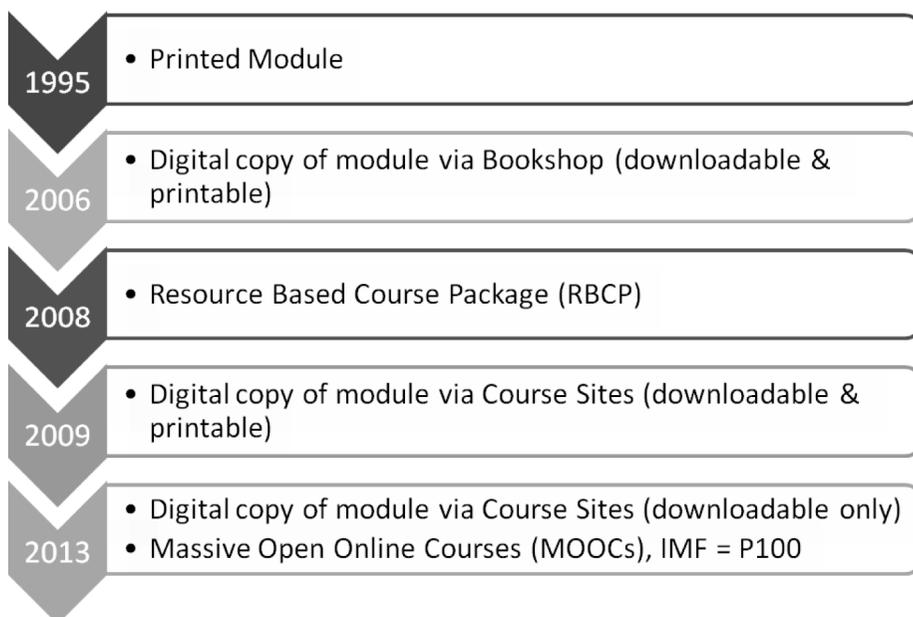


Figure 3: Changes in format of course materials

The offering of online courses also allowed UPOU to have offshore students located in more than 40 countries. This increase in the number of offshore students eventually paved the way to establish the Virtual Learning Center for offshore students with full-time Coordinator in 2011 from the previous part-time assignment of responsibilities to other UPOU units. The online registration is also expected to redefine the role of the local Learning Centers and their Coordinators.

OBJECTIVES

This paper presents the alignment on the openness views of the UPOU administration and the UPOU support unit staff.

Specifically, the objectives are:

1. To know the support staff's view on their office's role in the development of ODeL.
2. To know how they envision their office's research thrusts in the context of ODeL.
3. To know how they envision their office's contribution to public/community service in the context of ODeL.

METHODOLOGY

The information and data needed in the preparation of this paper were collected from existing UPOU documents (e.g., reports, concept notes, excerpts from meetings, related researches) and through the data gathered from the focused group discussions (FGD) involving 32 UPOU support unit staff.

In the FGD, the respondents were divided into five groups with 6-7 members each. They were asked to answer the following questions:

1. What is the role of your office in the development of ODeL?;
2. How do you envision your office's research thrusts in the context of ODeL?; and
3. How do you envision your Office's contribution to public/community service in the context of ODeL?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Respondents

Age

The respondents vary greatly in age with a mean age of 43 years old. The youngest is 24 years old while the oldest is 56 years old. Table 1 shows that 60% belong to the 41-50 age group while 25% belong to the 31-40 age group. The rest are in the 51-60 (9%) and 20-30 (6%) age groups.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents According to Age

Age Bracket	Number of respondents	Percentage
20-30	2	6 %
31-40	8	25%
41-50	19	60%

51-60	3	9%
Total	32	100%

Gender

Majority of the respondents were female (72%). Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents according to gender.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents According to Gender

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Female	23	72%
Male	9	28%
Total	32	100%

Job Description/Job Status

Table 3 indicates that thirty-four percent (34%) of the respondents are Administrative Aide, followed by the Research, Extension and Professional Staff (19%), Project Staff (16%), Administrative Assistant (13%), Administrative Officer (9%), Students Record Evaluator (6%) and one Computer File Librarian (3%). Based on their job statuses (Table 4), majority of the respondents are on casual basis (59%), followed by those with permanent position (25%) and those who are classified as non-government worker (16%).

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents According to Job Description

Job Description	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Administrative Aide	11	34%
Administrative Assistant	4	13%
Administrative Officer	3	9%
Computer File Librarian	1	3%
Students Record Evaluator	2	6%
REPS	6	19%
Project Staff	5	16%
Total	32	100%

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents According to Job Status

Job Description	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Casual	19	59%
Permanent	8	25%
Non Government Worker	5	16%
Total	32	100%

Office/ Unit

As for the office/units, most of the respondents work in the learning center and OASIS units (28%). Respondents from OVCAA (25%) comes second, then OUR (16%) and one from the Library (3%).

Table 5: Distribution of Respondents According to Office/Units

Office/Units	Number of Respondents	Percentage
UPOU Learning Center	9	28%
Library	1	3%
OASIS	9	28%
OUR	5	16%
OVCAA	8	25%
Total	32	100%

Years of Service

Of the 32 respondents, 16 (50%) are in 16-18 years of service. Twenty two percent (22%) are in 1-5 years of service, followed by 6-10 years of service (16%) and 11-15 years of service (12%).

Table 6: Distribution of Respondents According to Years of Service

Years of Service	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1-5	7	22%
6-10	5	16%
11-15	4	12%
16-18	16	50%
Total	32	100%

UPOU Support Unit Staff's Perceptions on Openness in the Context of ODeL

The results of the focused group discussion (FGD) with the 32 UPOU support unit staff revealed that they had a good perception of what openness is (Figure 4). The respondents' ideas pertain either to *open admissions*, *distance learning at scale*, or *open curricula* which Daniel (2011) identified as dimensions of openness.

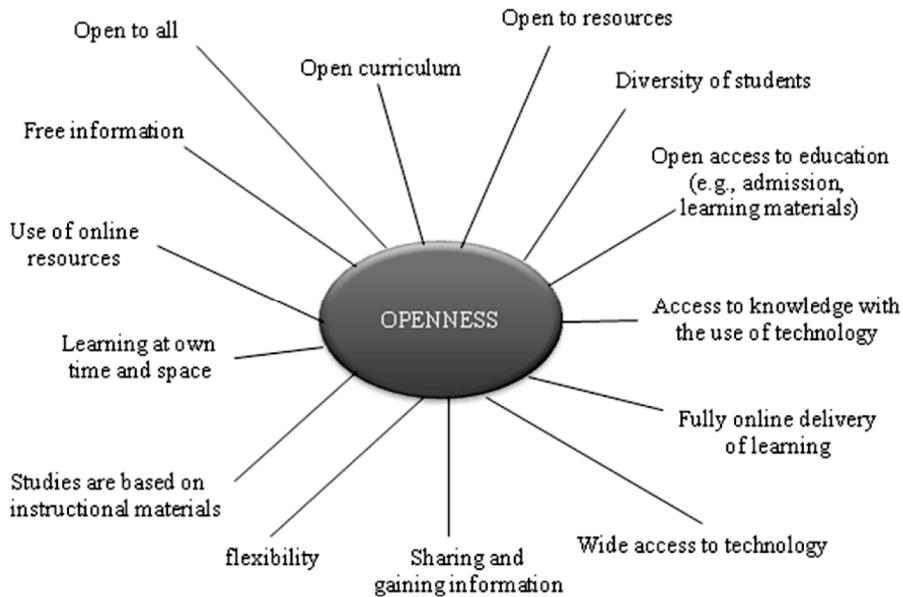


Figure 4: Summary of respondents' perceptions on openness

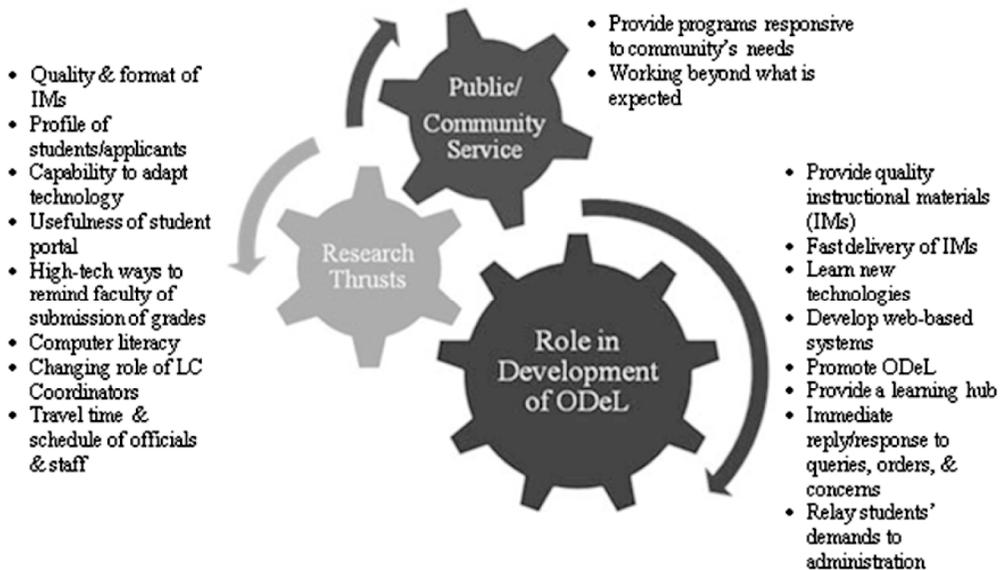


Figure 5: Summary of respondents' perceptions on their office's role in development of ODeL, research thrusts and public/community service

Figure 5 shows the interlocking of the role in development of ODeL (which also pertains to instruction), research thrusts, and public/community service. Like gears of “machine elements that transmit motion by means of successively engaging teeth” (Zhang, Y, Finger, S. & Behrens, S., n.d.), the three elements of ODeL should repeatedly engage with each other to come up with effective ODeL related actions and functions.

As the leading ODeL institution in the country, the value of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in academic and administrative operation has always been recognized by UPOU (Alfonso, 2012). Figure 5 also shows the respondents' response to their office's role in development of ODeL, research thrusts, and public/community service.

Role in development of ODeL. In the unit's role in the development of ODeL, the respondents gave emphasis on the development of quality materials (e.g., zero defects and errors), immediate response to concerns, and development of web-based systems to provide learning and administrative support.

Research thrusts. The research thrusts that the respondents envision range from study on students and staff (e.g., profile, behavior, preferences) to technology assessment. In enhancing research performance, the staff viewed the necessity of support and motivation from the head of unit, time management, training programs, etc.

Public/community service. One of the contributions to the community that the respondents envision is the offering of programs that are responsive to the community's needs (e.g., basic computer literacy, ethical practices, and social responsibility on the use of online sources). Aside from working beyond what is expected of them, below are some of the ideas they shared on what the following support unit can do:

- LC Provide good facilities/equipment and experience to any applicants who will inquire (e.g. free access to Distance Education Readiness).
- OUR Provide updated records for efficient services.
- OASIS Provide free access to module titles, and preview or overview of modules to give an idea to those who are interested.

Alignment of UPOU Administration and Support Staff's Mission and Vision

The UPOU's vision is to be at the forefront of the knowledge society as a leading institution of open learning and distance education, and one of its missions is to widen access to quality education. The views shared by the support unit staff on openness showed an alignment with UPOU's mission and vision, and the current UPOU administration's aim to be the leading institution in the region that is grounded in ODeL.

To fully embrace the philosophy of openness and strengthen quality assurance in UPOU, the internal alignment among the UPOU units, and the engagement of the administration and the support unit staff in the operations must have its foundation in ODeL. A unified workforce is created when there is a common vision, strategy, and brand promise that serves as the foundation for all messaging and actions and behaviours (DeMarco, R. 2013).

CONCLUSION

Openness for the UPOU support unit staff is related to the academic, administrative, and technological practices in UPOU which has remained grounded in the values of ODeL. An alignment on the openness views of the support unit staff and the UPOU administration is revealed in the study and is seen as important factor for UPOU to pursue its mission to widen access to quality education within its ODeL ideals.

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