

RESEARCH, PUBLICATION AND FUNDING WITHIN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA: AUDIT AND ACTION®

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ABSTRACT

While universities carry the dual function of knowledge creation and knowledge transmission through the process of research and teaching, there is on-going tension between research and teaching, particularly in terms of the demands on time and variable recognitions and rewards. In addition, there is a demand on all universities around the globe to increase their research and publication. In Malaysia, the rating exercise of universities is carried out nationwide using the Malaysian Research Assessment Instrument 2011 (MyRA®) by Ministry of Higher Education. The aim of MyRA® is to increase research quality in higher education institutions which in turn will produce high impact human capital, publications and intellectual property. The 2014 MyRA® rating for Open University Malaysia 2014 suggested that bold strategies are required to be on par with other private higher education institutions and this prompts this study. Three short surveys related to research, publications and funding were administered onto its academic staff. In addition, a visiting professor was invited i) to discuss how the university's research and publication performance could be improved, and ii) to conduct a series of workshops to promote research and publication and encourage action amongst academic staff. The paucity of research and publications within the university according to the survey findings is due to several reasons such as i) lack of emphasis on research and publications in strategic plans as well as in the terms and conditions of employment, ii) workload issue, and iii) lack of research skills. The Centre for Research and Innovation which manages all research related activities of the university has drafted out its Research and Innovation strategic plan taking cognizance of the issue raised by academic staff.

Keywords: Research, Publication, Funding, Audit

INTRODUCTION

The mission of Open University Malaysia (OUM) is to democratise education by widening access to quality education and providing lifelong learning opportunities by leveraging on technology, adopting flexible mode of learning, and providing a conducive and engaging learning environment at competitive and affordable cost. For the last 15 years, the university has focussed on teaching and learning using the Blended Mode approach via Self-Instructional Modules, Online Learning and Face-to-Face Tutorials. As a relatively young and new institution, OUM has given greater focus to utilizing scarce resources more in the area of developing and establishing programmes and systems. This renders Teaching and Learning and administration more important than research. The mass intake of the

sponsored in-service teachers and self-sponsored students took its toll not only on the infrastructure of the university, but also on its research activities. The ever increasing teaching and administrative load has made research become a distant endeavour for many of OUM academics. This has impacted the gross research output levels, as discovered in the self-assessment of research related areas based on the Malaysian *MyRA*® instrument (<http://accounting-research-institute.blogspot.com/2012/04/understanding-glossary-of-MyRA®.html>).

After 15 years in operation, OUM has no choice but to change the culture so that research is given a higher priority and that it is an important component of academic responsibility. In recent decades, faculty at comprehensive and teaching universities have also come under pressure to research and publish (Blackburn, Bieber, Lawrence, & Trautvetter, 1991). This change is more critical today as the Higher Education (HE) marketplace has become increasingly competitive. Research is vital, particularly with respect to faculty advancement – where research productivity is important for the hiring and promotion of individual faculty members, even in teaching institutions (McGill & Settle, 2012). Generally, in research itself, there are two sets of challenges, namely: challenge in undertaking research and the impact of research.

Research productivity is used as a performance indicator for all universities and college universities in Malaysia. The interpretations of what constitutes research productivity and how it can be measured vary by institutions and countries. The level of activity in research, development and commercialization for HEIs in Malaysia are measured using the *MyRA*® instrument, and its main purpose is to increase research quality which in turn will produce high impact human capital, publications and intellectual property. In this assessment exercise, participating universities including OUM were audited to verify the submitted information and records related to research by a panel of appointed experts by the Ministry of Education (MOE). The eight sections through which the state of the research of a university is assessed via *eMyRA*® are (BPKI, 2014):

- (1) Quantity and Quality of Researchers
- (2) Quantity and Quality of Research
- (3) Quantity of Postgraduates
- (4) Quality of Postgraduates
- (5) Innovations
- (6) Professional Services and Gifts
- (7) Networking and Linkages
- (8) Support Facilities

The outcome from the *eMyRA*® for OUM was quite disappointing. This assessment result was viewed by some as negative, in the sense that the institution has not placed research as its priority. However, there are others who take it in a positive manner, and treat this result as a challenge instead. OUM has only been in existence since 2001, and being a young institution, the more demanding needs are of course administration and teaching and learning, at the expense of research. The fact that 45 out of 65 private higher education institutions have subjected their institutions through *eMyRA*® for the same assessment, serves as a wakeup call for OUM. The results suggest that bold strategies are needed in order to continue to be relevant in the education sector in the coming years. In its quest to improve its status in research and innovation, an independent consultant, Emeritus Professor Fred Lockwood, was invited to OUM to work with academic staff to discuss how OUM's research and publication performance could be improved, and to conduct a program of presentations and workshops, seminars and games designed to both raise awareness of research, publication and funding and encourage action amongst academic staff.

While the eMyRA® audit was successful in collecting specific data, it did not provide information on current activities that could contribute to future research, publication and funding. It did not identify activities to nurture, structures to revise or replace, nor the support and assistance required. It did not provide a wider context in which current performance could be assessed. Within OUM it was acknowledged that staff forums, focus groups and a program of interviews, with representative samples of academic staff, could be used to collect data. It was presumed that a confidential, on-line survey of academic staff offered the prospect of minimum intrusion and rapid response with the opportunity for subsequent *progressive focusing* (future studies) upon any emergent issues

LITERATURE REVIEW

The link between faculty workload and low academic productivity has been examined in a number of cultural and institutional contexts. Cole (2000) has identified the paucity of unbroken time for research, expectations to be at the office, lack of resources to support, numerous faculty meetings and committees, and anxiety about promotion and tenure to be factors that impact on faculty's motivation and productivity. Others have cited lack of a collegial atmosphere as a key inhibitor of research productivity (Colbeck, 2002). Gappa, Austin, and Trice (2007) found that the three elements constitutive in academic workload – research, teaching, and service/administration pull academics in multiple directions simultaneously. However, not all three elements are weighed equally in measurements relating to 'productivity.'

Research productivity is institutionalised as the best indicator of faculty performance while studies have shown that teaching and service have little influence on promotion and tenure (Knowles, Cole, & Sumsion, 2000). Predictably, Taylor, Fender, and Burke (2006) have found that teaching and service commitments significantly affect research productivity. Increased amount of time in hours spent on teaching and duration of service in committees decrease research productivity to 9.6% from 17.7% while an additional year of heavy teaching load and service in higher ranked committee positions (e.g. chair/head) can decrease research productivity by 42% (Taylor et al. 2006: 856). Based on these numbers, time is therefore the most pertinent resource for academic staff. The professional significance and time spent balancing research and teaching is debated in the literature. Research and teaching have been regarded as conflicting activities; more time spent on teaching means less time for research and vice versa (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). Other authors argue that research and teaching are complimentary whereby each activity informs the other (Kremer, 1991; Smeby, 1998). While other authors, based on their study of how faculty members allocate their time to these tasks, argue that research and teaching are unrelated (Milem, Berger, & Dey, 2000).

A survey conducted by Houston et al (2006) on academic staff workload and their perceptions about research, teaching, and administrative responsibilities reveals dissatisfaction with overwork and feeling under-valued by the university. The study found that despite awareness of a workload allocation model, time allocated to research was quantified in terms of remaining time after teaching and administrative requirements had been met (2006: 25). Santo, Engstrom, Reetz, Schweinle, and Reed (2009) state that issues that impact on academic productivity are not isolated variables but rather they are 'situated in and connected to the culture of the institution' and would therefore require institutional and organisational solutions. Thus, a fair and transparent academic staff workload model needs to be drafted in order to identify activities undertaken by academics and allocates an agreed budget time to each one. An academic staff workload model facilitates course costing and can be integrated into annual planning and review cycles. The aim of such a model is to

motivate and reward research activity while maximising the institution's ratings in the eMYRA® system.

OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The Centre for Research and Innovation (CRI) at OUM used three short surveys to obtain OUM academic staff views and perceptions on three very important aspects: research, publications and funding. The set of data derived from these three surveys is backed by academic staff feedback obtained during group discussions. This study aims to determine academic staff's involvement as well as the factors that are considered as barriers in the specified areas. The finding from this preliminary study will be used as inputs to the university management with a view to promote research and publication.

METHODOLOGY

Three different sets of survey questions (shown in the results section) were administered through the Survey Monkey; whereby the URL for each survey was emailed to all 115 OUM academics who were given two weeks to fill in the survey forms.

RESULTS

The response rates for the three questionnaires were 65%, 57% and 60% respectively. A summary of responses is superimposed on the questionnaire and is reproduced as below.

Results of Survey (Questionnaire 1) on Research

1. Do your OUM Terms & Conditions of Employment specify that you are expected to conduct research and publish?

Yes	No	Do not know
21 (28%)	34 (45%)	20 (27%)

2. How much time (days per year) does OUM allow you to conduct research and publish?

None	Broad range
43 (68%)	20 (32%); from 'a few days' to '180 days'

3. Irrespective of any OUM allowance – how many days per year, if any, do you estimate you spend on research and publication?

Zero	Spent time on research
23 (33%)	45 (69%); average 39.5 days per year

4. Are you a member of a Research Group – either within OUM or elsewhere?

No	Yes
39 (55%)	32 (45%)

5. Do you have any formal training in Research Methods?

No	Yes
26 (37%)	44 (63%); About 40% via postgraduate activities

6. How much time would you be prepared to devote to a research methods course?

Majority (>90%) prepared to spend between 7 – 10 days.
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7. In the research you typically conduct, if any, do you tend to collect quantitative or qualitative data – or both?

Quantitative	Qualitative	Both
20 (28%)	12 (17%)	39 (55%)

8. Do you have a preference for a particular style of research?

Most popular style (43%) is survey style (questionnaires & interviews)

9. Would you describe your research, if any, as predominantly Domain Specific or more related to Learning & Teaching?

Domain specific	Learning and Teaching	Other
40 (57%)	24 (34%)	6 (9%)

Current Research Projects:

- IT in Business
- Profiling Learners
- Fitness and health
- Learner attitude to credit card behaviour
- Retention and online learning
- Software development: Impact on learning
- MOOCs, Mobile Learning
- Student engagement and satisfaction
- Comparative Study of Educational Policies

Results of Survey (Questionnaire 2) on Publication

1. Have you published any books?

No: 58 (90%) indicate no books published to-date
 Three (3) persons say 3 – 4 books have been written
 One (1) person maintains 18 books written!
 Several claim 'Reports', 'Modules', and Monographs as books!

2. Have you published any book chapters?

59 (80%)	indicated no book chapters written
12 (20%)	indicate have published book chapters

3. Have you published any journal article?

36 (60%)	indicated no journal articles written
24 (40%)	have published journal articles

4. Do you have any publications in press?

48 (79%)	have no publications in press
13 (21%)	have one or two publications in press

5. Did you present a conference paper in 2014?

33 (52%)	did not present a conference
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6. Do you have any publications planned?

30 (53%)	have publications planned
26 (47%)	have no plans for publication

7. What data, towards publication, have you collected to-date?

50% are in the process of collecting data; while others have not collected any data

8. Journals targeted
- Journal of Information Technology Education
 - New Media and Society
 - Journal of Asian Studies
 - Asian Social Science
 - AJODL – and other Open and Distance Learning (ODL) journals
 - Southeast Asian Journal
 - Educational Technology Research & Development
 - Journal of Research on Technology in Education

9. What barriers regarding the conduct of research and publication?

38 (67%)	of comments related to time – the lack of it
8 (14%)	related to funding – the lack of it
4 (7%)	related to benefits of teamwork & network
2 (3%)	indicated there was a lack of research expertise
1 (2%)	felt lack of library resources was a barrier

Results of Survey (Questionnaire 3) on Funding

1. Have you ever applied for research funding?

Yes	No
32 (46%)	37 (54%)

2. If 'Yes' what was / were the source(s) of this funding?

OUM	National	International	Others
25 (71%)	7 (20%)	2 (6%)	9 (26%)

3. Did you secure funding in 2013 or 2014?

In 2013	In 2014	No funds secured
12 (18%)	11 (17%)	46 (71%)

4. If you did secure funds what was the size of the funding (in RM)?

< 10,000	10,001-25,000	25,001-40,000	40,001-50,000	> 50,000
4 (15%)	11 (42%)	6 (23%)	4 (15%)	1 (4%)

5. How many researchers were involved in the funded project(s)?

One	Two	Three	Four	Five or more
2 (7%)	4 (14%)	7 (25%)	7 (25%)	8 (29%)

6. What were the main problems in assembling a successful proposal?

- Availability of time most common barrier
- Gate-keepers imposing unreasonable demands
- Able to do research without funds
- Lack of Expertise: Proposal, Research Methods, Data Collection

7. Who, within OUM, do you feel is able to provide advice and assistance in assembling a research proposal?

- Most common source: Deans, Professors, PhD holders and Senior Academics
- Directors of IQRI (currently CRI) and ITLA identified by many
- A proportion were unsure who to approach for advice!

8. Would you consider joining a Self Help Group that aims to provide mutual support and assistance to academic staff on an informal basis?

Yes	No	May be
34 (52%)	6 (9%)	25 (38%)

DISCUSSION

An interpretation of the responses identified practices that could be changed quickly to aid this output and structures that could support future research, publication and funding activities. It provides evidence that is encouraging. It serves to identify a series of actions that could rebalance OUM activities in terms of (i) *Teaching & Learning*, (ii) *Administration & Management* and (iii) *Research & Publication*.

1. Strategies, Plans and Practices

In the previous 2010-2015 Five-year Strategic Plan for OUM which sets out the overall direction of the University, there is little or no mention of neither research, publication nor research funding. However, its importance to the university is currently being addressed. University Research and Innovation Strategic Map, a mechanism to achieve the goals specified in the University Plan has been drafted for the consideration of the top management. A concern is raised as there appears to be some confusion regarding staffs' Terms and Conditions of Employment. The survey uncovered a disparity with almost half of academic staff (45%) indicating that their Terms and Conditions of Employment did not indicate they were expected to conduct research and publish. Over one quarter (28%) of the same academic staff believes that their Terms and Conditions of Employment do state such an expectation. Meanwhile, a significant percentage (27%) simply did not know they were expected to conduct research and publish. Efforts are being taken to set a clear direction.

2. Current Academic Work-load

There is an assumption that research output at OUM was 'unsatisfactory' because little or no time was devoted to research. However, the survey findings revealed a second disparity. It indicated that whilst a significant proportion (68%) has no time allowance for research and publication, the remaining 32% do have the time. The range of time apparently devoted to research is broad – ranging from 'a few days' to '180 days', from 'after office hours' to '20% of workload'. Furthermore, those who do engage in research spend a considerable amount of time doing so. For example, two-thirds (66%) of staff spent an average of 39.5 days on research. If these findings are generalised to the whole academic staff of OUM, it equates to more than 2000 days of research effort. The issue here is that this significant research input does not commensurate the publication output. Evidence from the surveys revealed that N=38 (67%) believed that the lack of time was the main reason for the poor research and publication output. As such, exhortations to simply 'work harder' are unlikely to be effective; staff needs to work smarter. In consideration of this point, enquiries were made regarding the presence of individual work-plans of academic staff, but none was discovered. It would appear that whilst staffs are working hard, there is no account of the activities upon which they are engaged in terms of the time devoted to them. There appears to be no measure of the time devoted neither to Teaching & Learning, Administration & Management nor to Research & Publication. It is possible that academic staff is engaged in non-academic tasks that need to be delegated to non-academic staff or current tasks to be completed in different ways. An audit of the activities undertaken by staff, the time devoted to them, and the outcomes will reveal the balance of work within individual Faculties and across the whole university. With this evidence, it would be possible to review the time allocated and agree on its redistribution. In this context, the goal would be to complete current activities, achieve the same objectives, maintain the same level of quality, but to do so in a different ways.

3. Research Group

A common strategy, to mobilize and support research effort, is to consolidate activities within research groups; groups with a common purpose and that can provide mutual support. One could be forgiven for assuming that OUM staff is not currently active members of research groups. However, the findings reveal that almost half of respondents are members of research groups – with one staff member reporting to be the head of such a group.

Furthermore, three staff members appear to be members of research groups in other universities. Whilst such membership is to be encouraged, OUM would benefit more if active research groups were established within the institution rather than outside it. In this context, modest funds could be deployed to invite active researchers from other universities to spend a short period of time working with OUM colleagues on specific research projects. This would not only promote the importance attached to scholarship and professional networking but could stimulate both research and publication. It is noteworthy that when staff were asked if they would consider joining a research group, 90% said 'yes' or 'maybe'. Whilst the creation of Research Groups within OUM is being actively pursued, they will only become established and thrive if time and funds are made available.

4. Research Training

The survey revealed that about two-thirds of academic staff had formal training in research methods – much of this undertaken as part of their PhD or Master Degree programs. However, just over one-third of respondents had no such formal training. In the survey, respondents stated they were prepared to spend between 7 to 10 days on some form of training. In this context, it is worth noting that numerous universities offer Research Methods Courses, several at Master degree level. As an alternative to formal, degree level research methods courses, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Practical Research and Evaluation Skills Training (PREST) could be considered for OUM academics. It is not only available online but free of charge. The PREST series is published by COL in collaboration with the International Research Foundation in Open Learning. As explained in the User Guide, the “materials aim to make available free research skills training in contexts with limited opportunities for staff development, and in particular, to help distance educators with limited research experience conduct principled and systematic research and evaluation. The resources have two objectives: to promote research and evaluation as a key part of professional development to be undertaken by all ODL practitioners rather than as the preserve of a privileged few; and to encourage ODL practitioners to become active producers rather than passive consumers of research and evaluation”. (Smurph, 2013, November 11). OUM is actively considering how this resource can be utilized to benefit members of the academic staff in acquiring and sharpening their research skills.

5. Publications

The survey did reveal that academic staff has published books, book chapter and journal articles in the past, but the years were not specified. This discrepancy in findings could be due to accounting errors or false claims. It would appear that, however small, there is experience of publication within OUM; experience that could be shared with colleagues. A total of N=13 (21%) claim they have one or two publications planned and half the academic staff have commenced the process of collecting data for publication. This is extremely encouraging since should this work be published in 2015, it would represent a significant increase over that published in 2014. Academic staff should be seriously considering publishing their papers in the online journal that is hosted by OUM. The collaboration between five ODL ASEAN universities, known as OU5, has produced an online journal known as AJODL (ASEAN Journal of Open and Distance Learning). The journal publishes two editions per year. Almost 50% of the academic staff (N=30) presented conference papers in 2014. The issue is, why were so few of these conference papers published in journals? The current practice requires staff members to present their papers in the OUM seminar series to colleagues and seek their comments and suggestions to ensure that the paper to be presented is of high quality. Such an exercise would disseminate information across the university and raise awareness of research activity. In addition, the university could require that the staff member publish the paper in peer reviewed journals or chapters in books other than conference proceedings. Such publications could be rewarded by conference funding.

Discussions with OUM staff members also revealed that considerable day-to-day work has been undertaken that could be refined and published. At the present time, it resides in filing cabinets. It was also noted that for some the prospect of book, book chapter and journal article production were daunting. As such an incremental approach to publication, a 'Ladder of Publication' (Lockwood, 2003), was judged to be worthy of consideration. As an example that could be emulated, Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK (Centre for Excellence in Learning) has created an *in-house publication* (not a journal) that offers staff the opportunity to present their 'Work in Progress'; to disseminate aspects of their work, and to work towards eventual publication.

If the university wishes to improve its publication track record, it could consider its PhD and Masters students besides members of the university who are currently engaged in research. For example, the university has 508 registered PhD students – half of them being supervised by OUM academic staff. In many institutions of Higher Education around the world, students are encouraged to publish an aspect of the research upon which they are engaged in. In fact for some institutions, one or two journal papers is a requirement for a Master and a PhD degree. If 10% of the current PhD students were to publish one paper in a year, with an OUM staff member as co-author, this would represent a significant increase in the rate of publication. Other obvious benefits include capacity building for students and staff, and most important of all, activities of writing and discussing between the supervisor and students will most likely improve students' motivation, retention rate and success rate.

6. Research Funds

Several barriers to research publication were identified in the surveys. Small proportions of staff identified the availability of library resources and training materials as a barrier. Whether real or imagined, this barrier needs to be addressed. With regard to research funding, almost half (46%) had applied for research funding with 17% in 2014. It is noteworthy that the availability of time was the most common barrier. However, it was also noted that staff believes the scrutiny of modest applications for grants is disproportionate to the amount of funds requested. Thus the survey findings suggest that the procedures implemented in assessing research proposals with modest grants is a disincentive to apply. It was noted that one is able to do research without funds – by simply taking advantage of the technology or services available within OUM.

7. Styles of Research and Focus

Amongst the research currently being conducted, the survey revealed that both quantitative and qualitative data were typically collected for both experimental and ethnographic studies. Whilst domain related research relate directly to the discipline (57%), about one-third of staff regard their research as being related to teaching and learning issues. The challenge remains in how the collection of research data can be turned into published products. The above findings may or may not be similar to other ODL institutions. Nevertheless, the heavy teaching and learning emphasis may place the institutions in a similar setting. Research collaborations between ODL institutions are often seen as a common ground where such challenges could be resolved.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The final draft of the Research and Innovation Strategic Plan is up for approval by the management. The plan is in line with the government's aspiration to develop research capacity in Niche Areas. OUM ought to focus its research efforts in selected niche areas such as e-learning, lifelong learning, assessment, course learning outcomes, assessment, student throughput, success, retention and graduation rate, and many others. In support of the strategic plan, a study is currently being carried out to measure the current academic

workload among academic staff to discover barriers that could be removed. The university is also reviewing the criteria and mechanism for academic promotion exercise by incorporating the research component in the appraisal form. Taking cognizance of the results of this simple study, CRI has introduced some changes including: (i) the double blind review in processing the internal research fund where research progress and outcomes are shared through seminar series, (ii) identification of major research areas to establish core research groups, (iii) well-designed research workshops series, and (iv) close working relationship with as many academics as possible by initiating “incubator research projects”. CRI also aims to improve its effectiveness in the management and evaluation of research grants to ensure translation of funds into meaningful outcomes.

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