

## Innovative practices in ODL — the experience of Open University Malaysia

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### Abstract

*With the advancements in communications technology brought about by the advent of the Internet and World Wide Web, attention has been drawn to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) as a mode for teaching and learning. In Malaysia, the establishment of ODL universities such as Open University Malaysia (OUM) has expanded the role of ICT in learning and knowledge generation. By leveraging on Internet technology, ODL universities are able to transmit education across the country and even globally. ODL sets about making quality e-learning and e-content more accessible to both facilitators and learners. Utilising this method, new opportunities are continuously created to make higher education more accessible to those who seek to improve and upgrade themselves. This paper examines OUM's practice of using the innovative technology of online learning and teaching to make higher education easily accessible to those that seek it. With greater advancements in technology, the future of higher education may lie more with ODL than with traditional face-to-face learning.*

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning (ODL), online learning, pedagogy, MyVLE, open university

### Introduction

Countries striving to attain developed status need to have a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. In other words, a nation's development can only be achieved if its people are well educated and possess the required professional expertise to help it move forward. Education has become a big business in Malaysia and if it is successfully carried out it will make a significant and sustained contribution to the nation's GDP. Under Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) 2010, the education sector is expected to contribute 4% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and to directly enhance the lifetime earnings of Malaysians.

Malaysia targets to develop the first-world talent base that it needs by 2020. Education is expected to be a robust engine of growth and a high economic multiplier to the country. However, given the current emphasis on developing a skilled workforce and the quest for more postgraduate degree holders, there are several important opportunities for improvement such as having a more international focus and developing educational policies that are consistent, realistic and less subject to the vagaries of internal politics.

## **Globalisation and education**

The globalisation and knowledge without borders phenomena have enabled educational institutions to compete on a more level playing field on the international stage. Educational institutions today need to be able to not only fulfil current needs, but also to be proactive in modifying and reinventing present innovations for future applications. Malaysian higher education has been facing fundamental changes triggered by the effects of globalisation and the speed of change in communications technology.

Today, the global networks of the information society have brought about undoubted benefits to the government and the public, especially in terms of opportunities for trade, and economical access to communication, markets and technology. Higher education as a consequence, has also been caught up in this wave of globalisation. In fact, Scott (1998) has described the radical processes of globalisation as implicating higher education as the creator, interpreter and sufferer of such trends. The global education market is an intensely competitive one with universities aggressively promoting their programmes not only in-country but also abroad.

In Malaysia, education has progressed in line with the shift towards productivity and growth based on knowledge and innovation. Due to the close link between education and productivity, the relationship between the government and educational institutions will change to reflect market-oriented goals and to produce graduates who are well prepared for the job market. The goal is to produce graduates who are capable of carrying out research, are innovative and have the ability to utilise the latest in ICT.

The Malaysian government encourages lifelong learning programmes<sup>1</sup>, provides access to quality education and is expanding public institutions of higher learning. The aim is to ensure that the country will have human capital that is resilient, skilled and knowledge-driven to provide the impetus for its continual development and growth. Malaysian public universities have been providing degree programmes using traditional methods of teaching and learning. However, their capacities have been stretched to the limits and many of them have been unable to increase their intake of students without compromising quality. As such, institutions using other modes of learning and teaching are needed to increase the opportunities for continuous learning.

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<sup>1</sup>The role of OUM is to provide lifelong learning programmes with flexible entry requirements.

## Open University Malaysia's innovative practices

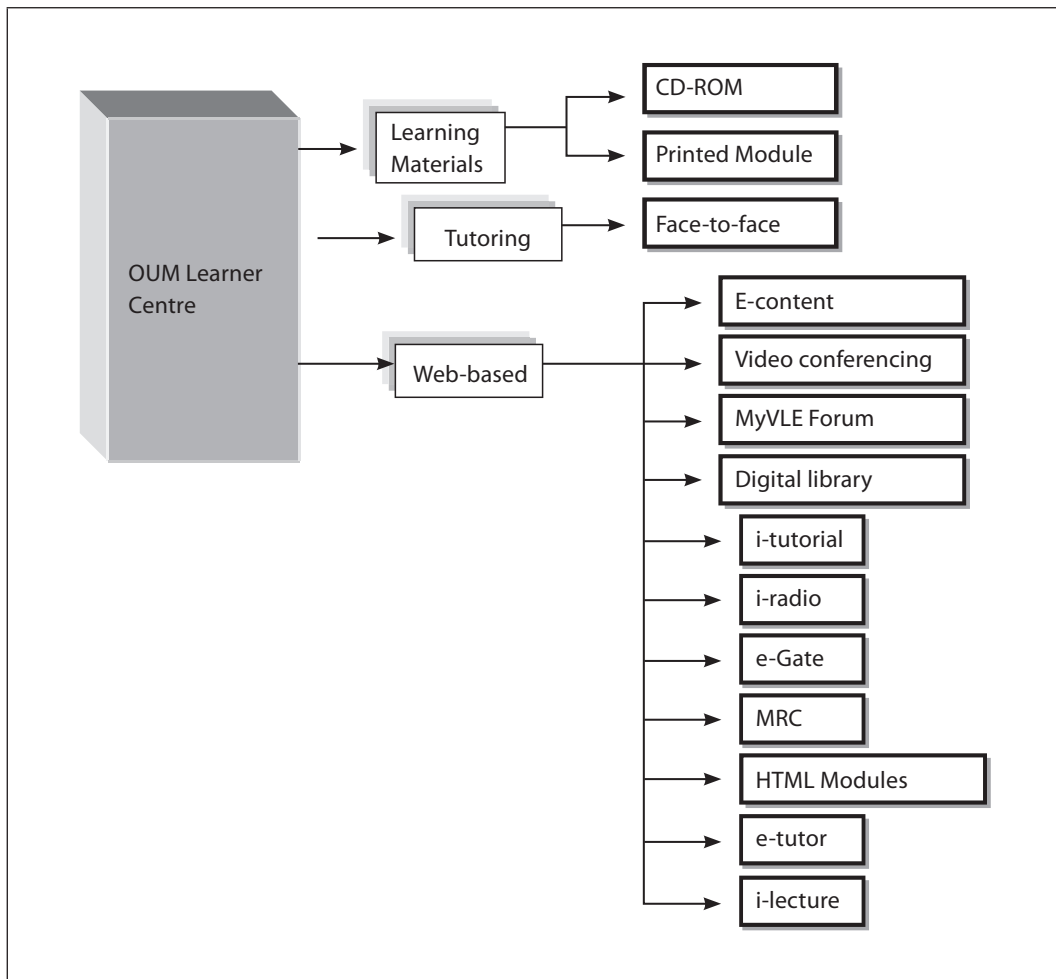
Lifelong learning can be promoted by using e-learning and open and distance education to increase accessibility. The Malaysian government has set up a National Council for Lifelong Learning, which provides the platform for policy formulation and coordination facilities. This action has encouraged the formation of open universities to cater to the demands for tertiary education, especially from working adults. Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the pioneer in the country in providing education to working adults using the latest technology compatible with e-learning and e-teaching.

OUM has improved its teaching and learning methods by adopting modern technology and a blended pedagogy. It recognises that higher education has to be continuously improved upon due to the persistent influence of global trends and its links to society. Within this context, it is useful to relate the role of OUM and show how it has steered tertiary education in Malaysia.

OUM was established based on the concept of providing higher education using the latest Internet technology, thereby allowing access to education for all. OUM is a private education provider and plays a vital role in encouraging innovation in course delivery, assessment methods and higher education curricula. Indeed, OUM was the first Malaysian ODL institution to be set up (in 2000) to fulfil the nation's aspiration of increasing educational opportunities for its people, especially its working adults.

Through the years, ICT and ODL have become synonymous with the way OUM operates its programmes (UNESCO, 2002). Indeed, Internet technology has increasingly become an indispensable tool for OUM's students (Abu Zarin et al., 2008) because the university has adopted the blended learning pedagogy that consists of three components: self-managed learning, face-to-face interactions and online learning. The blended pedagogy prescribes limited sessions of face-to-face tutorials and the use of printed learning materials alongside online coaching and forum discussions. In other words, its pedagogy is premised on self-managed learning (80%), face-to-face interaction (8%) and online learning (12%) (Abas et al., 2008).

While e-learning allows for freedom in self-learning, it requires much discipline and perseverance. From experience, the institution has observed that this strengthens a student's will to succeed and to achieve future advancements in his or her career. Certainly, this makes learning via OUM's methods a dualistic achievement — obtaining a degree (knowledge) and building character. Over the years, the university has developed and fine-tuned its web-education, taking advantage of the rapid technological advances occurring globally. **Figure 1** shows the current ODL model used by OUM and how it is carrying out its programmes for higher education.



**Figure 1** The current ODL model of OUM  
Source: OUM Portal (<http://www.oum.edu.my>)

OUM has developed a unique system for teaching and learning online. This system enables learners and tutors to interact online. Courses are delivered digitally and discussions are carried out online. This e-learning management system is called My Virtual Learning Environment (MyVLE). MyVLE allows the integration of various features such as instructor's and students' tools, technical support, administrative tools and functions that facilitate the teaching and learning process (OUM, 2005).

This method has given credence to digital education. It is now possible for students to learn outside the classroom and to interact with their peers online. This is the asynchronous feature which is significant to OUM's MyVLE approach in engaging both learners and tutors in an environment that permits the transmission and interaction of course materials between different parties at various locations. Indeed, this concept of "no classroom boundaries for learning" that is enabled by digital education also contributes to the empowerment of learners who are

geographically dispersed. It enables them to self- manage their learning. This innovative practice gives meaning to the phrase “democratisation of education”, which is one of the objectives of setting up open universities in Malaysia.

While MyVLE is OUM’s most frequently used innovation, the university has other web-based methods in place. These include a digital library that can be accessed from anywhere. Video conferencing has become an integral part of the operations of OUM. For instance, the use of video conferencing has made it unnecessary for PhD students to travel to Malaysia for the oral defence of their dissertations. Since 2009, four PhD qualifying exams and *viva-voce* sessions for nine master’s students and one PhD candidate have been conducted using Skype, the video chat tool.

In contrast, the “i-tutorial” appears to be less frequently used, perhaps due to the popularity and easy accessibility of other modes of learning such as print modules and digital library materials. The underlying concept for the university is that learners have a choice of selecting the most cost-effective system that allows them flexibility for learning interaction, whether through the web-based and/or multimedia modes together with printed modules. **Table 1** shows the increase of OUM’s innovative learning materials and its total graduates over the past 11 years. **Tables 2** and **3** respectively show OUM’s undergraduate and postgraduate enrolment in 2009 and 2010, and **Table 4** shows its cumulative enrolment from 2001 to 2011.

Items	2000	2011
Cumulative intake	753	104,362
No. of programmes (TOTAL)	4	60
Undergraduate (MQA/JPA: 18)	4	32
Postgraduate (MQA/JPA: 13)	–	26
BPG	–	2
Learning materials	29	1,664
Print based and study guide	–	1,084
HTML based	–	558
I-Cast	–	400
I-Lectures	–	18
Learning centres	12	47
Tutors/Facilitators	100	10,654
Graduates		32,342
Undergraduate		31,555
Postgraduate		787

**Table 1** OUM’s innovative learning materials and total graduates from 2000 to 2011  
Source: May 2012 preview slides, OUM

Year	Enrolment (Number of undergraduate learners)
2009	60,660
2010	55,591

**Table 2** Total OUM undergraduate enrolment in 2009 and 2010  
Source: OUM annual report 2010

Year	Enrolment (Number of postgraduate learners)
2009	2,413
2010	3,661

**Table 3** Total OUM postgraduate enrolment in 2009 and 2010  
Source: OUM annual report 2010

Year	Cumulative number of learners
2001	753
2002	7,625
2003	17,004
2004	26,682
2005	36,065
2006	53,352
2007	64,678
2008	75,750
2009	86,662
2010	89,000

**Table 4** OUM cumulative enrolment from 2001–2010  
Source: OUM annual report 2010

## Conclusion

OUM may consider improving MyVLE by designing and developing a more user-friendly and comprehensive learning system. Such a system would be multi-faceted and highly interactive. The system would integrate all existing learning objects under one platform, but it would be organised in a way that guides learners in their exploratory learning process. Creating such an integrated system with an all-in-one interface would provide learners with a level of accessibility that is not available with the present system. The current system appears to be

an “unintegrated model” that does not allow learners to communicate and visualise through a “unified whole model”. An integrated model system can serve as a springboard for OUM to become a leader in ODL education.

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