DEMOCRATISATION OF EDUCATION:
THE CONTRIBUTION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

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DEMOCRATISATION OF EDUCATION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First and foremost, I am greatly honoured and privileged to be invited to deliver this plenary paper entitled “DEMOCRATISATION OF EDUCATION: THE CONTRIBUTION OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL).” My gratitude goes to the organisers of AAOU Conference as well as our gracious host, Bapak Atwi Suparman, the Rector of UTI.

In this address, I will share with you on how ODL can contribute to the process of democratisation of education with particular reference to Malaysia. As some of you are probably aware, Malaysia aspires to be a developed nation by the year 2020. In line with this aspiration, our government appropriately placed education as the highest priority sector in its strategic planning. This is evidenced by the highest budget allocations given to this sector since the 1960s. And the fruits of this human capital investment can clearly be seen today. The recent creation of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is another important initiative in this direction. The ministry is entrusted with the principal task of formulating policies to make tertiary education as a catalyst in building a skilled and knowledgeable workforce to enhance our nation’s global competitiveness.
I will discuss these policies later, but for now, allow me to share with you an overview of the world educational scenario, particularly in relation to open and distance learning (ODL). This is necessary in order for me to relate the role of ODL in transforming today’s higher education.

1. World Educational Scenario

The development of human capital has often been recognised as an important instrument to achieve economic progress in any nation. Education is seen as one of the effective ways to eradicate poverty, provide occupational and social mobility and enhance the quality of the labour force. This is clearly stated in UNESCO’s constitution in which 190 nations proclaim their belief in Education for ALL. Thus, one can observe that there has been an international commitment to bring education to all, going back some 60 years ago; although the achievements in many countries are disappointingly well below expectations.

As we are aware, the primary reason for this relatively poor performance is that many developing countries are so disadvantaged that they are unable to “take-off” economically; thus reinforcing their inability to provide adequate funding for educational purposes. This is further complicated as the provision of education has become increasingly costly, especially at the tertiary level. Thus, a more creative approach is needed to provide an alternative avenue for increasing access to a bigger section of the
population. The issue of affordability is thus central to the push by many governments to enhance access to education.

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I think we all can agree that ODL is the alternative approach in providing a viable solution to enhance accessibility, affordability and flexibility in education. Studies have shown that on the average, ODL delivery mode costs approximately 40% of the traditional mode. But costs alone are not a sufficient criterion in choosing a particular mode of delivery. What is more important is its quality. In this respect, we have also evidence where the materials delivered by ODL are of superior quality when compared to the traditional universities.

In tandem with its lower costs and high quality learning materials, the ODL mode can thus be propagated as the preferred mode of providing education for all in any part of the world. The proliferation of mega universities (universities with a student population of 100,000 or more) throughout the world bear testimony to the impact of ODL; and I may add, some of our distinguished guests and our host, Bapak Atwi Suparman, are among the privileged few leading such institutions.
2. Reforming Higher Education in Malaysia

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Let me now share with you the latest developments on the higher education sector of my country. Following the examples of other more developed countries, Malaysia is one of those countries that strongly believe in providing education for all. We fully subscribe to UNESCO’s call for providing ample opportunities to all our citizens to acquire education at all levels. We also believe that there is a need for a strong foundation in the development of a knowledge culture and the provision of the necessary facilities to acquire knowledge and skills for every member of our society.

In line with a rapidly changing learning scenario, affected mainly by globalization and far reaching innovations in information and communication technology (ICT), the Malaysian Government has embarked on an initiative to involve the private sector vigorously as providers of educational services. This become very visible since the mid 1990s, during which a number of legislative edicts were introduced propelling the growth of private sector education.

While responding to the changing global environment, the demands for more places at the university level meant that educational reforms must be initiated and thought through by our policy makers. Thus, new legislations, particularly in the realm of higher education were put in place; including the following:
a. Education Act (Amendment), 1996;
b. National Accreditation Act, 1996;
d. Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, 1996;
e. Universities and Universities Colleges Act (Amendment), 1996; and

In this address, I would like to share with you the major education policies and trends in Malaysia, taking into account the impact and prospect on the socio-economic development of the country.

2.1 Democratisation of Education

Presently, 30% of the 17-23 age cohort enrolls in tertiary education. The Government has set an enrolment target of 40% for this cohort by 2010. In achieving this target, as indicated earlier, the government introduces policies that allow the establishment of private higher education institutions (PHEIs). This development has led to a rapid expansion of not only in the number of educational institutions, but also provides the opportunity for education providers to build their capacities as well as create a healthy and competitive education industry. To this end, the Ministry of Higher Education has set a target of 1.6 million places in tertiary education by 2010.
With this relatively rapid democratisation process in tertiary education, it is hoped that an expanding and a more competent workforce can support the fast changing needs of the economy which is increasingly driven by knowledge and IT-based activities. With a greater number of highly skilled human resources, Malaysia, being one of the more important trading nations in the world, will have to be more competitive globally. During the initial years of its economic development, Malaysia depended on low wage labour with low skills to generate mainly labour-intensive manufacturing activities, including textiles, motor-vehicle assembly and electronics. But with increasing competition from even lower wage labour from other developing economies since the end of 1980s, China being the more visible, we now have to rely on higher level skills and proficiency to add value to the country’s products and services.

2.2 Promoting Malaysia as an International Centre of Educational Excellence

As we know, universities worldwide are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of internationalisation, international networking and collaboration. Reaching out beyond the national borders becomes inevitably significant for the simple reason that the world today is becoming more global, more interdependent and at the same time more competitive. With globalisation, there seems to be little choice for higher education providers, but to expand in the same direction to seek more
international students; and, perhaps more importantly, to create an image of academic excellence and creditability. In simple terms, we can say that one of the consequences of economic globalisation has been the internationalisation of higher education.

Since the economic downturn in 1997/98, the number of Malaysians studying abroad has declined dramatically. The weakening Ringgit against the US Dollar and the Pound Sterling then had not only discouraged Malaysian students to go abroad, but it created an attendant impact that witnessed an increasing number of foreign students studying in Malaysia to earn local as well as foreign degrees. Apart from the growing number of private universities and colleges, branch campuses of foreign universities, particularly from United Kingdom and Australia, were allowed to operate to tap on this growing market demand. In line with this development, the Ministry of Higher Education has set the target for private universities to enroll 95,000 foreign students by 2010.

This should augur well for the country if foreign exchange is to become an important component in the country’s drive to upgrade its educational services. As an example, Malaysia currently hosts some 53,000 foreign students. Assuming each student pays an average on RM30,000 to complete his or her academic programme, this represents an income of RM1.6 billion for Malaysia. Indirectly, this move will also create a
competitive environment amongst the local universities, thus in the
process, promoting Malaysia as a centre of educational excellence in the
region.

3. Towards the Development of a Knowledge Society

_Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,_

Today, it has become a clarion call for many universities not only to
develop knowledge workers by producing the best graduates, but also
become the centres for creativity and innovation. If the priority of the
Malaysian government is to create a greater supply of knowledge workers,
then more opportunities and university places be given to school leavers
and even working people.

This strategy will certainly contribute towards the formation of a
knowledge-based economy, hopefully providing the appropriate platform
for sustainable economic growth and making a greater impact in the global
market place. Simultaneously, capacity building will be a fundamental
aspect of this change; including the capacity to innovate, adapt, design
and develop new products and markets.

In this kind of environment, the formation of a knowledge-based economy
will be in place, propelling the country towards an industrialised nation
status. The impetus to achieve such a status should begin by exploring the
many possibilities and options through which the country has to enhance its human capital. One of the vehicles is certainly by developing ODL to its fullest potential.

4. Open University Malaysia: The Nation’s First ODL Institution

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I have little doubt that all of us who are here today are convinced of the notion that ODL providers have contributed substantially in the democratisation of education in many parts of the world. The trends that we have observed in many countries and the success of a number of ODL institutions being called “mega universities” speak for itself. While Malaysia is relatively new as far as ODL is concerned, the support currently shown by government leaders towards lifelong learning and e-learning, I believe, will bode well for ODL in the future.

In this context, let me briefly introduce you to Open University Malaysia (OUM) which is the first and currently the only ODL institution in Malaysia. Many of you may have realised that OUM was established in 2000 as a unique model; and perhaps, the only one of its kind in this part of the world. It is a private university owned indirectly by the earliest 11 public universities in Malaysia and started its operations with a launching grant from the Malaysian government. With the initial synergy and academic
networking, OUM leverages on the academic and physical resources of these public universities to develop and deliver its programmes.

The first intake was in August 2001, exactly a year after it was set up. In that debut intake, 753 students were enrolled in 4 academic programmes. Since then, the university has progressed beyond the early expectations of its pioneering leaders. As indicated in Table 1, OUM currently has an enrolment of more than 33,000 learners; a progression path that is symbolic of the current drive to provide windows of opportunity for working people to be engaged in upgrading their academic credentials.

In this regard, I am very proud to inform you that OUM is currently contributing towards one of the nation’s priority areas in education, that is, the upgrading of our primary and secondary school teachers, who are currently certificate and diploma holders, to become degree holders. Currently, OUM has a set of 6 Bachelor of Education Programmes in 4 areas of specialisation, namely Teaching of English as Second Language (TESL), Science, Mathematics and Engineering. The number of teachers presently enrolled with OUM is over 14,000. Over 4,000 more will enroll next year.
Table 1

Progress of Open University Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>August Semester 2001</th>
<th>September Semester 2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolment</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>33036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of programmes (Diploma, Bachelor, Master &amp; PhD)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of modules (Printed, CD and Web-based)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Learning Centers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Tutors</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>3662</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And this group of teachers who are currently with OUM is only part of the bigger picture. Malaysia now has about 300,000 teachers, of which 200,000 are in the country’s 2,000 primary schools and 100,000 are in the 1,000 secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has set the objective of upgrading all secondary school teachers and half of the primary school teachers to first degree holders by 2010. As for the secondary school teachers, the target is almost met. However, with regard to primary school teachers, currently, only 14% or 28,000 of them possess a first degree and above. Based on the target set by MOE, another 36% or 72,000 of them need to be upgraded to degree level by 2010.
Since 2010 is only 5 years away, the number of teachers that have to be enrolled in the country’s universities for their degrees will total 14,400 per year. As implied above, OUM is the largest university which enrolls these teachers into their degree programmes, while the intakes of other universities are very small. And I believe this scenario will not change significantly in the next few years. Thus, in the meantime, OUM will have to play a leading role in upgrading these teachers. Given our current capacity, I am very confident that OUM will be able to meet this challenge. Thanks to its ODL mode of delivery, OUM can quickly expand its capability and provide high quality training programmes for these teachers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I get carried away with only the good news, allow me to trace back the progress of OUM. Given that I became OUM’s President in January 2004, I must say that its success until now had its beginning during the pioneering days of the first and late President, Dr. Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad, who to my mind, set the pace and established an excellent management culture for the university. With this background, I believe that the achievement of OUM thus far is attributable to a number of other factors as well; the more important ones being the dedication and commitment of the academic and support staff, flexible mode of delivery, affordable fee
structure, high quality learning materials, and well-chosen and adequately trained tutors.

Our blended mode of delivery comprises of the following components as shown in Figure 1. The flexibility underlying this blended mode allows OUM learners to adapt and adjust quickly into an academic environment appropriate to their learning ability.

Figure 1
Mode of Delivery at Open University Malaysia

Being new, we also benchmark ourselves against other well-established ODL institutions such UKOU, HKOU, KNOU, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open
University, IGNOU, UTI and many others. Their vast experiences in ensuring quality programmes and learner support services have been a tremendous help in mapping our learning strategies. Equally important, quality becomes our guiding principle in strategising our internal processes so that OUM learners will be engaged in an enriching and rewarding learning experience throughout their study years. To do this, the following support systems and services have been put in place:

1. Learner Services Centre
2. Digital Library
3. Learning Management System
4. Integrated Student Management System
5. Distributed Learning Centres
6. ICT Services, and
7. Academic Counseling Services

Under a learner-centred environment as we practice nowadays, we have little choice but to continuously improve the quality of teaching and learning among OUM learners. As such, our research and development efforts have been fundamentally directed towards improving institutional performance. In this regard, our research activities have been focused on areas such as service quality, learners’ priority and satisfaction, collaborative online learning, module development processes, e-learning readiness, effectiveness of academic counseling, development of e-content
and performance of tutors. The results of these researches have been dissected and debated amongst our faculty members; after which they are used to improve our internal processes and operations.

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

In our quest for quality, the following strategies, among others, have been put in place:

- The establishment of the Centre for Quality Management and Research & Innovation to spearhead our initiatives in quality, research and innovation.

- With respect to ISO Certification, OUM’s Digital Library has recently been awarded the ISO 9001:2000 Certification. Two other departments are in the process of getting their certification.

- OUM’s learning materials are developed principally in collaboration with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) from Malaysian public and private universities and are developed in-house by the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CIDT).

- All OUM’s tutors are required to attend training sessions on ODL Pedagogy to familiarise them with OUM’s teaching and learning modes.

- OUM’s programmes are approved and accredited by the Malaysian National Accreditation Board (LAN).
We believe that the above initiatives will help OUM to maintain and improve our overall quality in line with our vision to be the leader and innovator in ODL.

5. Challenges for Democratisation of Education

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

While we at OUM are very proud of our achievements thus far, I must admit that there is still room for improvement in our internal processes which the management is meticulously monitoring so that every faculty, department or unit is focused in achieving OUM’s objectives. At the same time, we are also faced with several challenges that are external to us, but nevertheless, needing solutions and strategic initiatives. Based on OUM’s experience, the key issues and challenges that must be addressed are as follows:

5.1 How do we ensure education is available to all?

5.2 How do we ensure that our education system continuously provide knowledge and skills that are relevant at the workplace?

5.3 How do we ensure that our learners can learn at anytime and from anywhere?

5.4 How do we ensure that our learners embrace active and interactive learning?

5.5 How do we encourage self-managed learning among our learners?
5.6 How do we encourage effective use of technology in an ODL environment?; and

5.7 How do we ensure that the democratisation of education does not result in inequalities between the haves and the have-nots?

6. The Way Forward

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

The above issues and challenges would require some rethinking on the part of government leaders and policy makers, leaders of educational institutions, academics as well as industry managers. At the macro or national level, some existing policies need refinement or enhancement while others may need a total revamp. A continuous dialogue between these stakeholders would indeed be useful. A very fundamental aspect of education, particularly higher education, is the need to enhance awareness about open learning and the positive impact of encouraging lifelong learning.

What are the policy initiatives and strategies to be introduced to support these needs? At this stage, I would venture to suggest the some possible options:

First, the education system needs to embrace fundamental change in the learning process. There is a need to replace the information-based,
teacher-directed rote learning provided within a formal education system to one that will allow greater latitude for students' creativity and ability to apply, analyse and synthesise knowledge.

Second, the government needs to play a central role in promoting, developing and nurturing "education for all" among its citizens. This is an important aspect of nurturing awareness within the community to continuously seek knowledge. The establishment of OUM’s School of Lifelong Learning (SOLL) recently is certainly relevant for this purpose.

Third, in line with the rapid changes in information technology, the government and industry must collaborate in developing adequate and affordable ICT infrastructure to reduce the digital divide among the country’s citizens; thus promoting “connectivity in learning.” Besides affordability, the question of accessibility to the larger segment of the community needs to be simultaneously resolved. The relatively high costs of investment in providing such an infrastructure must be balanced with its potential to allow not only the dissemination of knowledge but also the efficient management of the organisation. Technology, as we all realise, is also an efficient enabler in promoting advances in pedagogy and learning culture.

Fourth, as the costs of education at all levels become more restrictive, the private and public sectors need to work together to finance learning. In complementing the role of the public sector, the private sector must be
encouraged to play an increasing role in education while ensuring its quality. Given that the public sector can no longer be the sole provider of education, adequate incentives for private education providers must be in place to increase spending on human resource training and development. Apart from student funding, the government must also provide adequate incentives for education institutions to be more innovative in developing their contents and modes of delivery in order to meet learners’ needs.

Fifth, quality assurance systems are needed to assess the learners’ achievement as well as the learning providers. Policy makers need to rethink on the accreditation of programmes and institutions. Traditional criteria of assessment need to be revised to reflect the recognition of prior learning (RPL), that is, knowledge, skills and understanding gained outside the formal education system. The need to give recognition to prior learning is a key ingredient for the development of our K-society.

Conclusion

I hope by now we can agree that one of the key elements in the economic development of our countries is the democratisation of higher education, allowing the citizens of the country to maximise their potentials in acquiring knowledge and new skills. With the impact of globalisation and the rapidly changing scenario in technological development and innovation, developing countries in particular must be able to sustain the momentum
of economic growth through the adoption of new approaches in upgrading their human capital.

I believe that ODL, with its open and flexible learning and leveraging on ICT, will be able to contribute towards increasing the socio-economic well-being of any nation. In higher education, it will certainly complement the traditional or conventional university mode; and hopefully will together shape the future of learning. Finally, we must also bear in mind that the capacity to effectively sustain our economic growth and development will be dependent upon the receptiveness to new and more flexible education and learning systems.
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