OPEN LEARNING AT OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA (OUM)

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Abstract: This paper traces the history of Open University Malaysia (OUM) during the past two years. The paper focuses on the establishment, milestones, academic system and support system of OUM. Key issues and challenges are highlighted.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The idea of setting up of OUM can be traced to the meeting of Malaysian Public Universities Vice Chancellors' Council, back in 1997. Arising from this meeting, a consortium called Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operation Sdn Bhd (METEOR Sdn Bhd) was established in January 1998 with a paid up capital of RM 5.5 million of which the 11 public universities enjoy equal equity. The main objectives of this consortium are:

- to optimize the intellectual and physical resources of the public universities and
- To assist in realizing one of the objectives of the Multimedia Super Corridor project through its active involvement in e-education and multimedia.

In June 1999, METEOR submits a proposal to set up OUM. After several round of discussions, METEOR was officially invited to set up OUM in August 1999. The establishment of OUM was approved by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia in August 2000.

23rd May 2001 is an important date in the calendar of OUM. On that particular date, OUM was presented with the Approval of Registration by the Minister of Education. In conjunction with the presentation of Approval of Registration, approval was also obtained by OUM to deliver its first four programmes at Diploma and Degree levels.

OUM was officially launched by the Prime Minister Dato Seri Dr Mahathir in August 2002.

Presently, OUM offers 11 programmes at Diploma and Degree levels. It is expected that four new post graduate programmes will be introduced in August 2003.
Starting with an initial enrolment of about 1000 students, OUM now has about 12,000 students population.

2.0 MILESTONES

Initially, METEOR operates at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Next, the office was transferred to Technology Park. As the number of staff increases, METEOR and OUM moved to Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya. In May 2002, OUM moved to its new campus at Jalan Tun Ismail, Kuala Lumpur. Major milestones of OUM over the past two years are as listed below:

- Invited by MOE to set up the university on 4th August 1999
- Established on 10th August 2000
- Registered on 23rd May 2001
- First intake of students in August 2001
- Second intake of students January 2002
- Additional intake of students in March 2002
- Third intake of students May 2002
- Fourth intake of students in August 2002
- Officially launched by Prime Minister on 26th August 2002
- Fifth intake of students on January 2003
- Total enrolment presently is about 12,000

3.0 ACADEMIC SYSTEM

The vision of OUM is to be the leader and innovator in open learning. The academic system of OUM was designed to meet this vision as well as the requirement of open learners. The following sections outline the basic structure of the system.

3.1 Entry Requirement

Although most open learning institutions do not have academic entrance qualifications, OUM requires its students to have at least an O-level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Requirement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certificate/Diploma</td>
<td>O-level with credit in any two subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>O-level with credit in any two subjects AND Passed A-level OR Passed foundation studies OR Possess a recognized diploma from public/private institutions OR Has related working experience AND Passed the entrance examination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Academic Calendar

There are three semesters in one academic year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>January Semester</th>
<th>May Semester</th>
<th>August Semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 Weeks</td>
<td>11 Weeks</td>
<td>23 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 weeks tutorial</td>
<td>8 weeks tutorial</td>
<td>15 weeks tutorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 weeks break</td>
<td>3 weeks break</td>
<td>8 weeks break</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For any particular semester, students are not allowed to register for more than 2 courses. During the long January and August semester, the maximum credit loading is 10 (two 5 credit courses) while during the short May semester, the maximum credit loading is 6 (two 3 credit courses).

3.3 Curriculum Structure

The curriculum of OUM programmes (Diploma and Degree) comprises of:

- LAN courses ~ 9 credits
- OUM courses ~ 15 credits
- Core courses ~ (60 – 100 credits)
- Elective courses ~ (5 – 20 credits)

OUM courses comprise of English I, English II, English III, Entrepreneurship and Professional Ethics.

The numbers of credits required for graduation are:

- Diploma : 91 credits
- Degree :105 – 129 credits
- Masters : 50 credits

At OUM, one credit hour is defined as 40 learning hours. The learning hours are inclusive of lectures, tutorials, laboratories and self managed learning.

3.4 Evaluation

The assessment system is made up of both continuous and final exam. OUM places equal importance on both components.

Continuous:

- Assignments: 30 %
- Class tests : 15 %
Online participation: 5 %

Final Exam:
Part A (Multiple choice / Short Questions): 20 %
Part B (Essay): 30 %

3.5 Grading Scheme

The university adopts the following grading scheme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Marks</th>
<th>Grade Point</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>80-100</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Outstanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>75-79</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>Outstanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>70-74</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>65-69</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>60-64</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>Satisfactory Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>50-54</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>Marginal Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>Marginal Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Marginal Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the conditions for the conferment of degree is that a student must obtain a CGPA of at least 2.0 in the final semester. The progress of all the students is closely monitored. Anyone getting a GPA of less than 2.0 will receive an academic advice from the Head of School.

3.6 Recognition of Prior Learning

Transfer of credits for courses taken at other recognized institutions of higher learning may be granted subject to the following conditions:

   a) The course submitted for credit transfer has at least 75% overlap with the course offered by OUM
   b) The grade and grade point obtained for the course is not less than C or 2.0 respectively

Under special circumstances, candidate may be required to sit for a test to qualify for the credit transfer.
4.0 SUPPORT SYSTEM

To facilitate learning, the following support services were provided:

4.1 Learning Materials

Learning materials provided include specially constructed printed modules and where necessary, this is supplemented with audio/video tapes, CD-ROMS and other reading materials.

4.2 User ID and Password

Every student is provided with a single sign on user ID and Password. This user ID and Password allows the student to access:

- MyOUM
- E-mail
- Learning Management System
- Digital Library

4.3 MyOUM

This is a portal that is customized to an individual user. Through this portal, user can access E-mail, Learning Management System and the Digital Library. Online bulletin, announcements, timetable, assignment questions, examination results and sampled exam questions are ‘push’ to the students through MyOUM.

4.4 Learning Management System

LMS is an application that allows students, tutors and administrators to upload information for the purpose of learning, support and keeping track of the learning process. Some of the features provided include course content, discussion board, announcements, evaluation and progress report. The LMS was locally developed and designed with the ease of use in mind.

4.5 Digital Library

The digital library was designed with an ‘open’ concept in support of the University’s vision and mission, and to ensure the availability of digital collections anytime and anywhere in support of the open learning environment. Currently, the library is using an integrated library management system, namely the Virtua
ILS, an I-portal that manages the ‘in-house collections’ and all data bases subscribe by the library.

The library collection comprises of digital and print collection. The digital collection includes two e-book databases – Ebrary.com and Books24x7.com. These two databases have more than 15,000 titles in disciplines such as sciences, social sciences, management, business, humanities, technology, computer science, engineering and law.

The other component of the digital collection is e-journals. The five databases are EBSCO, Emerald, Engineering Village 2, Springer Link and Proquest Education.

4.6 Learning Centers and Regional Centers

OUM has established a strong network of 30 Learning Centers at selected public and private institutions all over the country so as to provide easy access and effective support services to the learners. The Learning Centers are fully equipped with tutorial rooms, resource centers and computer labs.

As the student population grows, more Learning Centers will be established. Apart from Learning Centers, OUM is currently in the process of setting up Regional Centers in selected states to act as a one-stop center for the students. With the establishment of the Regional Centers, functions currently being handled by the Head Office/Main Campus will be decentralized. With this move, OUM hopes to upgrade its service quality and enhance its presence and visibility.

4.7 Face-to-face Interaction

Tutorial sessions are conducted fortnightly during weekends or after office hours at the Learning Centers. Issues related to course materials, assignments and academic counseling are discussed during the tutorial sessions.

5.0 ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Being a relatively new university, OUM has certainly makes its presence felt. Nevertheless, there are several issues and challenges that need to be addressed as the university progresses. Below is a list of some of the major issues.

5.1 Content Development

Creating good quality content suitable for open learning is not an easy task. This applies to both printed module, web-based as well as CD-ROM based content. Most of the academicians are not familiar with developing open learning
materials. Thus, a great deal of time is spent in training of content writing, moderation of content, instructional designing works as well as language editing.

During the initial phase of the university, the time for content development was quite limited. As such, quality is somewhat compromised. Nowadays, the time to develop content has been increased from 4 months to 8 months. With extra time, the content writer is given a slightly more time to develop quality content. Quality improvement process such as ‘field test’ has been incorporated as part of standard operating procedure for content development.

Developing good quality web-based content is easier said than done. Content writers or subject matter experts need to work closely with the instructional designers and web programmers as a team. All team members need to be creative and should understand the potential power of the computers and the Internet. This can only come through experience. Even evaluating the quality of the content represents a major problem.

Contents that are rich in graphic and multimedia lent itself naturally to CD-ROM. Here, the issues are the high cost of development, production and distribution. Upgrading of content is of course a major challenge for all CD-ROM based materials.

OUM realizes that in open learning, content is king. Thus, a center called CIDT (Center for Instructional Design and Technology) was set up during the early phase of the university. This center is headed by a director. The center has about 40 full time staff which comprises of instructional designers, multimedia programmers, graphic artists and desk top programmers. Most of the staff however lack real experience and need time to develop their expertise.

5.2 Tutors

Since OUM had only about 50 full time academicians, most of the tutorial sessions are conducted by our part-time tutors. Presently, OUM employs 650 tutors throughout the country. The academic qualifications of our tutors vary from Bachelor to PhD. With 650 tutors of varying academic qualifications, ensuring consistent quality of tutorial is not easy. OUM manages this by adopting stringent selection process, quality training system and development of special training module for the tutors.

5.3 Accessibility

The issue of ‘digital divide’ is still a real phenomenon in Malaysia especially in the rural areas. Thus, OUM needs to work closely with other Government agencies in order to minimize this problem. Even when the access is available, the speed is far from satisfactory. Essentially, the IT infrastructure throughout the whole
country needs to be upgraded. The sooner this is done the better. Otherwise, the concept of e-learning and digital library will only be a dream for some of the students.

Another issue related to accessibility is making sure that the servers are available all the time i.e. 24x7. In this respect, OUM is in the process of co-locating our servers at several strategically located data centers throughout the country.

5.4 Customer Service

OUM students only meet their colleagues once a fortnight at the Learning Centers. In between tutorial sessions, they are more or less on their own. Should our students encounter any problems related to their study at OUM, they can call a toll free number. At the moment, this service is only available during weekdays. Five customer service consultants have been trained to provide the service at the Learner Service Center. The possibility of extending the service over the weekends is being considered.

At OUM, all the staff is reminded to treat our students with respect, care and understanding. Customer service is an important aspect our delivery system.

5.5 Quality

Being a newly established private university, it is not easy to attract and retain students at OUM. The only way to achieve this through hard work and of course making sure that there is quality in whatever we do. Quality is central to all our activities. One of the highlights of the launching of OUM was a 2-day workshop on Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning.

6.0 CONCLUSION

OUM is a relatively new player in open and distance learning. There are still many challenges ahead. Fine tuning of its academic and support system are necessary as the technology changes and students’ expectation increases.