

Enhancing Teaching and Learning: Development of a New e-Learning Model at Open University Malaysia

Formal Education: Technologies for Scaling up ODL Programmes

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INTRODUCTION

Open University Malaysia (OUM) which was established in 2000 was the first open and distance learning (ODL) university in Malaysia. It has the unique status of a private university yet indirectly owned by the government through its shareholders, the first eleven Malaysian public universities. Having been in operation for more than 9 years, OUM has cumulatively enrolled about 95,000 learners, and has produced over 26,000 graduates. The growth of OUM is quite phenomenal, as indicated by the increase, not just in terms of student numbers but also in the number of programmes and learning centers. Nationwide, it has made its presence felt through 61 learning centres that are located at all major towns and cities across the country.

At the international level, OUM has been working with various foreign partners offering both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Thus far, OUM has collaborated with institutions from Yemen, Bahrain, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Ghana. To date, the total number of international learners has reached almost 2,000.

OUM, like any other universities, engages in a rapid process of change, particularly in areas that concern the quality of its graduates and their professional competencies. Quantity and quality are both important considerations as it seeks to continuously improve its services to its increasing number of learners. Learners have become increasingly diverse, bringing with them a variety of backgrounds and experiences. In its efforts to meet the challenges posed by this diversity, OUM has adopted a “flexible mode of delivery” through a “blended learning” approach.

The blended learning in OUM encompasses the face-to-face tutorials, online/e-learning learning and self-managed learning. The face-to-face tutorial allows learners to interact directly with their tutors in physical classrooms made available at the learning centres. The online/e-learning requires learners to learn through Internet, and it is supposed to augment the face-to-face interactions. Despite of the tremendous efforts directed at encouraging the use of e-learning, the usage, thus far is perhaps best described as not concerted, and its use rather superficial.

SHORTCOMINGS OF THE EARLY E-LEARNING MODEL

By its very name, *e-learning*, it must involve learning. To state that a specific e-learning initiative is a failure, suggests that the intended learning did not take place. In order to sort out the reasons for such a failure, we need to distinguish between the technology for launching and tracking instructional activities from the instructional activities themselves. A Learning Management Systems (LMS) is like a vending machine. While it is important that it works well, what is more important is what it dispenses. Having an LMS without an effective online instruction will not produce any significant learning results, in spite of the hype to the contrary. Thus a scrutiny of the e-learning practices (as shown below) is undertaken to

identify what has worked and what has not and to take immediate steps to overcome the barriers in achieving the learning objectives.

a) Learning Management System (previously known as myLMS)

The learning management system (LMS) which was developed in-house by OUM's staff since the beginning of the university's operations in 2001 serves as the main e-learning platform. Although the LMS is fairly stable and secure, learners found it not too user-friendly, the navigation tool can be quite cumbersome and access can sometimes be quite slow. Another setback is that the LMS does not come with a feature that allows tutors' and learners' online activities to be monitored. Thus, it was difficult to identify inactive tutors and learners; hence, specific intervention on inactive tutors and learners was not possible.

b) Limited Content

Under the early e-learning model, the main content uploaded onto myLMS were the PDF versions of print modules, which constitute the most important learning material under the blended pedagogy. Since this represents just a softcopy of the printed modules with no additional features included, there is no real incentive for learners to access them through myLMS. They resort instead to the print modules. There are also other learning materials that come in various formats such as learning objects, i-tutorials, power-point slides, etc, which are internally developed and made available to learners. Even though the quantity of contents is limited, usage of these materials is also low. The possible reason could be that these materials were not linked to the course content. Learners have to open another window to access those materials, rendering the learning process cumbersome.

c) Virtual Classroom Setup

To promote familiarity, it was decided that the virtual classroom be an exact replica of the physical classroom. This means that the virtual classroom is facilitated by the same face-to-face tutor. It also means that learners in the virtual classroom are the same learners as in the physical classroom. The main drawback here is that not all face-to-face tutors are excellent online facilitators – some may not be very active in an online setting, and there are some who may not know how to communicate well in the online environment. The other drawback is that the number of learners in one virtual classroom is small since face-to-face tutorials usually have between one to twenty five learners only. The lack of diversity in such small classes will not add value to learners' learning, for diversity has been found to lead to a far more enriching learning experience.

d) Evaluation for Online Participation

To encourage learners to access myLMS, OUM introduced an incentive system by allocating five per cent marks for online participation. The marks are to be awarded based on quality and quantity of questions posted in the online forum. However, it turned out to be more complicated than what was anticipated; different tutors have different standards of assessing the quality of postings and due to the subjective manner in which the postings are assessed, tutors who do the evaluation lend themselves to being questioned and complained by learners. The result of a survey administered to learners in 2007 showed that the main reason why learners use the online forum in myLMS was the 5% marks. This explains why learners resort to posting simple short messages which are not totally relevant to the course, thinking that they have fulfilled the quantity of postings required to secure the 5 marks. In summary, the allocation of marks for online participation has not achieved its desired objectives of encouraging learners to use the forum for effective collaborative learning.

e) Reward Scheme for Facilitating Online Participation

The online facilitator is rewarded with a maximum of MYR200 (USD60) per semester for online facilitation. This small reward is basically for the facilitators to cover their Internet cost when doing the facilitation from their own homes. A separate payment for tutoring covers both the face-to-face as well as online facilitation. Online facilitation is indeed very demanding in terms of time and effort and hence many tutors try to evade the task, by forgoing the extra MY200 and just concentrating on the face-to-face facilitation. This approach fails in its objective of motivating tutors to go online and to give their best commitment to this task.

f) Need for Training

Online delivery is necessarily dependent upon enabling academic staff, tutors and also learners to operate effectively in the new environment. Teaching staff needs to be familiar with the LMS and to be able to use it just like the way they would use a word processing application to prepare tutorial handouts. In OUM, some selected tutors were given proper training in online facilitation, while others are expected to perform the online facilitation with only the generic ODL training. Hence, the quality of online facilitation varies from tutor to tutor and this poses a considerable impact on the overall quality of the teaching and learning at OUM. Training on the use of e-learning is also critical for learners. Learners need to be able to participate in online learning from the moment they enrol, to be inducted into more sophisticated use of the environment during their early part of study. They will have to continue developing online literacy within their chosen discipline area for the whole duration of that programme.

g) Group to Champion e-Learning

Prior to the May 2010 semester, there had been no special unit designated to champion the cause of e-learning at OUM. Thus, there has not been a concerted effort towards developing an e-learning framework and perhaps even a five year e-learning roadmap for the institution. Thus the changes and improvements made in this very important component of the blended pedagogy has been described as sporadic, piecemeal and exploratory.

h) Over Reliance on Face-to-Face Tutorials

Over the past nine years, OUM has been focusing on developing print modules. Hence, there has been an over reliance by both learners and tutors on the use of the printed modules and the face-to-face tutorials. Developing modules for distance learning is very demanding; and reviewing the contents after each use based on learner and tutor feedback also consumes a lot of time, effort and money. This over emphasis on the print modules, at the expense of e-learning, has made OUM lag behind to a certain extent in its e-learning endeavour.

STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW E-LEARNING MODEL

There are basically four reasons why OUM is focusing on the e-learning component of the blended learning. Firstly, it is due to the growth of technology, which renders e-learning as an ideal vehicle for education and learning. Secondly, e-learning offers both learners and tutors/facilitators access to anywhere, anytime information rich resources. Thirdly, e-learning provides an alternative learning strategy; it can reach those previously denied access, for example learners with physical disability, those from remote areas, and even prison inmates. Fourthly, e-learning can supplement the face-to-face classroom offerings, thereby freeing up valuable resources while expanding the offerings to larger number of learners. It is time for OUM to move ahead with its fuller implementation of e-learning in its teaching and learning and this approach is in agreement with Volery (2000:36), who concurs that if universities do not embrace e-learning technology that is readily available, they will be left behind in the pursuit for globalisation.

Among the most visible and valuable attributes of e-learning delivery are that they allow learners greater access to education, in comparison to more traditional and less flexible educational methods. E-Learning fosters interaction among learners and tutors, and interaction stimulates understanding and the recall of information. Besides it also accommodates different learning styles and fosters learning through a variety of activities that apply to different learning styles. With e-learning, it allows self-paced learning so that learners can learn at their own rate. While training them to take responsibility for their own learning, OUM hopes to prepare them as true lifelong learners.

In migrating to the new e-learning model, OUM is mindful of the criteria that should be considered and it is equivalent to what has been suggested by Huffaker (2003):

- User interface and multimedia that suit learner needs and can maximise the learning experience;

- Personalised and effective content;
- System for continuous evaluation from and for the learner; and
- Innovative ways to manage and explore large and complex amounts of information.

These criteria are indeed very useful measures for any e-learning model. However, it is also important to recognise that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach (Lee, 2005) and that there are many differences – in terms of courses, objectives, learner demographics, environments, and many other factors that need to be given attention in developing the right e-learning model. Thus this section focuses on the changes that have been made to improve teaching and learning in OUM.

a) Virtual Learning Environment (myVLE)

The previous LMS used by OUM has been thoroughly revamped and upgraded. As a new entity, it was appropriately renamed as my Virtual Learning Environment (myVLE). myVLE has been designed to be learner-centred, easy to use with intuitive navigation tools – an effort to make myVLE more user-friendly and attractive to the learners. myVLE also comes with features that allow easy tracking of the online activity of tutors/facilitators and learners. Intervention via automated e-mails has also been incorporated within myVLE so that tutors/facilitators and also learners who are slow are duly reminded. Initial feedback on this feature has been very encouraging. The e-learning platform also provides automatic links to resources and services, such as the digital library, learner support, administration, within the learning materials provided to ease learners in their learning process.

b) Web-based Content

One critical factor contributing to an e-learning success is content. First there must be sufficient content, and the contents should be in various formats to cater to a diverse learner population. It goes without saying that the contents should be interesting and engaging to learners to sustain their learning interest. The main learning materials must comprise more than just print and PDF versions of the modules. Since January 2010, OUM has embarked on a project to develop web-based content for its print modules. Thus far, almost 230 print modules have been transformed into HTML-based content, all of which have been successfully developed and uploaded into myVLE. The web-based content is much more engaging and interactive as compared to the static PDF-print modules. This change is anticipated to bring about a huge difference to the use of e-learning and will inevitably create a far more enriching learning experience for learners.

c) New Virtual Classroom Setup

While the previous virtual classroom setup was more concerned with promoting familiarity, there was a lack of diversity and a dire need to ensure the quality of online facilitation. As such, under the new e-learning model, the virtual classroom has taken a new form. Each virtual classroom or forum is created based on a facilitator to learner ratio of 1:400. This creates a larger collaborative community where both totally online and blended learners from various learning centres are grouped together. The classroom is facilitated by a designated e-tutor appointed by the relevant faculty. Learners communicate in the virtual classroom for the purpose of collaborative learning.

d) Eliminating Evaluation for Online Participation

Since the exercise of evaluating learners' online participation proved to be very difficult, due to its subjectivity, and more importantly when it was found that the marks was the real incentive of going online, this evaluation was thrown out. Instead, with a new and better virtual classroom setup, learners are naturally encouraged to participate online, communicate with learners and e-Tutors for the purpose of acquiring, sharing and exchanging knowledge, without having to be enticed into it. Since the forum allows for much greater number of learners to one e-tutor, the ensuing discussions become richer, the learning becomes more meaningful and the learning experience a satisfying one.

e) Greater Reward Scheme for Facilitating Online Participation

To garner greater commitment from online facilitators, the reward scheme has also been revised. With the new e-learning model, facilitators are remunerated with a maximum of MYR 1000 (USD 300)

for their work in one semester. We hope that with a better reward system, online facilitators will make full use of the new model and give their best commitment in each of their respective virtual classrooms.

f) Better Training Programmes

From the large number of tutors (about 4000) involved in tutoring every semester, it is quite easy to identify the most active and competent among them in the virtual classrooms. Once identified these tutors are then invited to attend special e-tutor training programme to help polish their online facilitating skills. From our observation, the trainings have helped improve the quality of online facilitation throughout OUM.

g) Establishing a Group to Champion e-Learning

To ensure a concerted effort in the management and deployment of e-learning, a designated e-learning unit under the Institute of Teaching, Learning and Assessment (ITLA) was set up. Perhaps the immediate task of this unit is to develop the e-learning framework for OUM, and to incorporate a five year, that is 2010 - 2015 e-learning roadmap. The said unit will also track and monitor all e-learning activities, conduct e-learning related research, provide appropriate intervention for improvements, innovate and look for ways to further improve use of e-learning in teaching and learning. This unit, will bring OUM's e-learning to the fore and if done well, OUM's e-learning will be a catalyst in the capacity building of the country's human capital development.

h) Emphasis on e-Learning: Fully-Online Courses

In these last nine years, OUM has cumulatively enrolled over 95,000 learners, and they are diverse in nature, some are working in the government sectors, and some in the private; there are some who are above 55 years, the senior citizens. A small percentage of learners are physically disabled, and about 2000 learners are from the remote areas of the country. There are also a small percentage of the prison inmates. Since e-learning is an important tool for delivery, interaction and facilitation of both teaching and learning, and that it caters for diversity, OUM is set to maximize its use. In this regards, OUM has planned to offer one course fully-online in the September 2010 semester. In the subsequent semesters, more courses will be offered fully online, and by 2012, at least one programme will be offered fully online.

THE WAY FORWARD

The development of the new e-learning model marks a significant change in the delivery of courses and programmes at OUM. This strategy of maximizing the e-learning component of the blended learning represents part of OUM's long term strategy of widening access and in fulfilling its mission of democratizing education. It is hoped that with the new model there will be an overall improvement of the delivery and quality of OUM's academic programmes. One of the features that need to be added on to the new model is to create and upload videotaped lectures. Streaming videotaped lectures via the Internet will be a useful complement, particularly for purely online courses. University of California Berkeley, the first institution to have its recorded lectures uploaded onto the World Wide Web via YouTube (accessible at <http://www.youtube.com/user/UCBerkeley>), has proven that this is indeed a viable platform for delivering higher education through e-learning.

Another new initiative to be introduced is to schedule online forum for synchronous and real-time discussions, other than the normal asynchronous discussion forums between learners and e-tutors. This will render the learning that takes place in the face-to-face and in the online environment, seamless. Learners can have a choice of either face-to-face or online tutorials. The seamless nature of the

discussions will also allow for different blends of delivery depending on the nature of the course, some may require more tutorials upfront, while some may require just one or two tutorials only. OUM is in the midst of preparing a thorough and detailed guideline on managing the online forum, taking into consideration the implementation of fully online courses. In this respect the selected e-Tutors will also be given a more thorough training to improve their facilitation techniques. Apart from that, as a means to add variety to learning resources, presentation slides for all learning materials will be developed and uploaded onto myVLE.

As we aim to give e-learning greater weight in the blended pedagogy, a handbook for tutors and learners will be developed. The handbook will assist both learners and tutors to maximise the use of e-learning. Focus group discussions with learners and tutors will be a regular feature at the end of each semester, with a view to gathering feedback on the effectiveness of the fully online courses. For the specific module "Malaysian Studies" which will be offered fully online next semester, a research using a course evaluation survey (online) will be conducted at the end of the course to determine the various success factors for delivering fully online courses.

In order for OUM to sustain its growth through e-learning, a strategic e-learning framework and an e-learning roadmap must be laid down. The publication by Suraya Hamid (2005) will serve as a useful source of information or reference for the development of the important framework and according to her, four major components namely the *strategy*, *competence development*, *infrastructure development* and *e-learning delivery* need to be incorporated.

CONCLUSION

E-learning is here to stay. Despite of the challenges faced in fully deploying e-learning in the teaching and learning at OUM, it will forge ahead with greater enthusiasm in coming up with new and innovative ways of doing things so that e-learning becomes the preferred choice of course delivery. Experience over the nine years showed that the need to create more conducive environment has proved to be a requirement for success in e-learning. Academic staff and tutors need to be continuously trained and upgraded of their pedagogical skills. Learners who are OUM's most important stakeholder needs to be fully trained in order to cope well in their online learning environment. The support and motivation of the top management who continuously adapt themselves to the changing technology and who inculcate positive attitudes to adoption and implementation of e-learning is critical.

What is certain is that whatever it takes, successful conversion to online is a move OUM could not afford *not* to take. Converting non-online courses to online courses is not only a process made more difficult – it provides an opportunity for re-thinking and reworking approaches to bring teaching and learning to greater heights.

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