
STANDARDS OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: STRENGTHENING TEACHING – AN OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA INITIATIVE

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Abstract

The Open University Malaysia (OUM) plays a differentiated yet complementary role to existing universities by responding to the changing needs of employers and adult learners in the emerging global education environment. At the same time, it is also expected to play a strategic role in helping Malaysia gain expertise in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Today, the university conducts programmes for about 90,000 students of whom more than half are teachers. The Teacher Education Division, Ministry of Education, had approached OUM to be a partner and leading higher education provider in their mission to have all secondary school teachers and 60% of the primary school teachers, graduate with the Bachelor of Education by the year 2015 as a part of the initiative in human capital development espoused by the government.

OUM practices a blended pedagogy, a unique combination of on-premise tutoring and assessment and off-campus learning through the ODL mode. Learners, as they are called, instead of students, are expected to self-manage their learning, that is, at their own pace. In addition to the specially constructed learning materials, these learners are encouraged to attend tutorials. The tutorial sessions are held once a fortnight during the semester at the sixty two Learning Centers established throughout the country so that learners do not have to travel far from their homes. Along with the generic issues, a particular challenge to OUM is the need to operate in a "dual-mode" supporting both print-based and online learning. Learner behavior suggests that learners who are currently enrolled prefer the blended pedagogy. However, many of them do not have proper ICT support and access in order to fully participate in online collaborative learning.

As the number of learners increase yearly, the university focuses on the multifarious activities related to the support system so that the concept of quality is embraced. The readiness for online learning, access to and familiarity with the technology required, proficiency in the language of instruction are some of the areas which are of interest to the university.

OUM has conducted a comprehensive survey among the learners to determine the extent of how much the students of the Bachelor of Education programme were satisfied with the quality of the above elements. In general, the students were happy with the all of the above dimensions which were elaborated in the research.

KEY WORDS: Open and Distance Learning, blended pedagogy, dual mode, collaborative learning

Introduction

Malaysia, in the last decade of the twentieth century, witnessed unprecedented and accelerated change at a pace that has never been experienced before. Advances in information and communication technology (ICT) have hastened the pace of globalization and the trend is irreversible. Vision 2020 initiated in the early 1990s may be perceived as Malaysia's first step into the Information Age and a globalised world. To enable Malaysia make the quantum leap towards an industrialized nation status and eventually into a knowledge economy, the country needs to build a world-class education system dedicated to producing a world-class workforce. For that purpose, it is making the effort to have 100 percent of teachers in secondary schools be degree holders by 2015 and at least 60 percent of teachers in primary schools be degree holders by the same year. The Teacher Education Division of the Ministry of Education, as the employer and manager of teachers, faces two major challenges in supporting the continuing professional development; namely in providing access to learning opportunities for large numbers of teachers scattered across schools throughout the nation and funding them. The increasing familiarity of distance education and the growth of ICT have stimulated challenging alternatives to the traditional forms of teacher education. The Open University Malaysia (OUM) became the best solution provider for the mammoth task of strengthening teacher education in the country by enhancing the standards of professional practices.

Prior to the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) on 27th March 2004, teacher education and training in Malaysia was entirely thought out, planned and organized by the Ministry of Education (MOE). From 2004 onwards, the secondary and primary school teacher education and training were separated and given to MOHE and MOE respectively. The MOE trains the primary teachers through the Institutes of Education (previously known as the Teacher Training Colleges) and MOHE trains the secondary teachers through the government-funded universities. Over the years teacher education in Malaysia has gone through many changes to meet the challenges of modern times. Thirty years ago, college graduates were conferred certificates in teaching after attending a two-year pre-service training programme. Twenty years ago the training was extended to three years and the students were awarded a Diploma in Teaching. In the last five years, efforts have been made to award a degree for those students who pass the courses, and the training programmes have been extended to five and half years.

The Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) launched recently explicitly states that competition for talent has intensified and it was noted that many developed countries were adopting policies to attract the best talent which included Malaysians. It is a well accepted fact that a skilled and knowledgeable workforce is the cutting edge of a nation's competitiveness. As such, the Government of

Malaysia planned to implement holistic measures to reinforce the education and training systems from early childhood to tertiary education. Thus, the quality of educators and teachers needs be of a very high level. The goal was then to increase the proportion of graduate teachers in both primary and secondary schools with 60% of the primary school teachers being graduates by 2015. It was also noted that the Government would ensure that teaching becomes a profession of choice.

Objective

The paper seeks to delve into various issues related to the challenges of open and distance learning in the continuing professional development of teachers. The objective of the paper is to ascertain the quality of the interventions provided for the teachers who had attended the degree programmes at the university.

The Learning Process: A Blended Approach

Open University Malaysia, through the Faculty of Education and Languages, was approached by the Teacher Education Division to provide the necessary training and education programmes to upgrade the qualifications of the primary school teachers. This was to be carried out using the blended approach in the learning process. Learners, as they are called, instead of students, are expected to self-manage their learning, that is, at their own pace. The learning environment comprises the self-study segment using specially designed open and distance modules and courseware, and the face-to-face tutorials with the tutors at the learning centres biweekly. In line with continuous improvement to the online learning environment, OUM initiated the major overhaul of the learning management system or myLMS with a name change to myVLE or my Virtual Learning Environment. The myVLE has seen the changes in the learning resources with links and interactivities. The online forum which will have a larger collaborative community will be handled by specific tutors (e-tutors) on a ration of 1:400 consisting of online and distance learners from various centres. Previously, the learners had one tutor allocated for both the face-to-face tutorials and online discussion modes. This new set-up has assigned two different tutors, one for the face-to-face tutorials which is held fortnightly and the e-tutor who manages the on-line forum. Learners have the choice of either the face-to-face tutor or the e-tutor for help and support in their learning.

Face-to-face tutoring groups are kept small – 20-30 learners per group to ensure quality tutoring. Only the best of suitably qualified academics and practitioners from the local universities and industry are appointed. They are given adequate training in all aspects of OUM's philosophy and Open and Distance Learning pedagogy. The open and distance learning provides opportunities for working adults to further their study without having to leave their jobs. With the assistance of MyVLE, learners also are more flexible in undergoing their course of study regardless of where they are when they are not attending tutorial sessions. The

blended learning approach which allows flexibility in the learning experience is developed to guarantee that OUM can move ahead with quality education as one of its strategic thrusts.

As OUM is an ODL institution, it relies on the technologies to enhance the learning experience of the learners. Some learners have easily adopted and adapted to e-learning while others needed the guidance and support. OUM has made available the "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners" module which has provided a detailed analysis of the e-learning strategies for the newly inducted learners to this technology. OUM has introduced several technological innovations such as iRadio, a well equipped Digital Library as well as mobile learning. Academic information and motivational messages are being sent to learners via SMS to help them learn wherever they are. The pilot project which was launched for the May 2009 semester involved 74 tutors and 1,863 first-semester students who were enrolled in a course "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners." Five categories of SMSs were used namely content, tips, motivation, course management and forum. A total of 31 SMSs were sent and these messages were complementing the learning modes used by OUM namely print modules, face-to-face tutorials and online forums. This initiative has been enjoyed by more than 12,000 learners and this is supported by the Facebook and Twitter. This initiative can be considered the first and only one of its kind which has been implemented on a large scale by an institution of higher learning in Malaysia.

The learners of OUM who are mostly working adults appreciate the flexible mode of study. OUM has introduced two online portals as support centres to help improve their competency in English and Mathematics. One is called the Mathematics Resource Centre (MRC) and the other the electronic Gateway to English Resources (e-GATE). The response to e-GATE has been particularly encouraging with close to 9,000 users from 37 countries within the first five months. This has become significant for the OUM learners as all undergraduate programmes are taught in English starting in January 2009.

These technologies are part of OUM's strategy to reach out to learners so that there are no barriers to educational access and resources. This is of utmost importance to those learners and teachers located in remote areas throughout the country.

Collaborative partnerships have been established between the MOHE and OUM to train the primary school teachers who are non-graduates and these include those in the remote areas who are now able to upgrade their qualifications and attain better prospects for their career development. These teachers continue to serve in their respective schools without having to take time off which they would have done if they had enrolled in traditional universities. The Ministry in this case would be able to maximize on their teachers as they do not need to replace them with relief teachers as the teachers are enrolled in the OUM

programmes which has adopted the blended pedagogy as its learning mode. The teachers are able to read course materials either online or in the form of printed modules. The physical interaction takes place during the tutorial sessions which are held fortnightly during the weekends on the first and third Saturdays or Sundays of the month. Online forums are also made available on the MyVLE for them to interact with their tutors and peers to enhance their understanding of the learning content.

These arrangements have benefitted not only the teachers in the urban areas but also those located in the most remote areas where the population depends heavily on river transport to get them to places. For these people the other option could be the logging tracks which become slippery during the rainy season making it almost inaccessible and unsafe. Thus the learning option made available by OUM has made it possible for large numbers to enrol in the Bachelor of Teaching under the special scheme provided by the Government to increase the number of graduate teachers in primary schools. The Government has recognized the fact that the country's future workforce need to effectively respond to the changing needs of the market. It was felt that nurturing and producing a competent workforce requires a combination of knowledgeable teachers and an effective education system. Besides it was felt that providing students with a strong foundation by placing competent teachers at the primary school level contributes towards effective human capital development.

OUM has been instrumental in training non-graduate teachers by offering its academic programmes through distance mode that enables the teachers to continue studying without having to leave their jobs. The other significant initiative is the distance learning programme for teachers in remote areas, which the OUM has been conducting since 2007. The once-a- fortnight tutorials provide opportunities for the participant teachers as well as the tutors who benefit from the interactive processes at work. The lecturers from the Institutes of Education are recruited as part-time tutors or even as subject matter experts (SMEs), and this is a form of capacity building for their professional growth as well as for the Teacher Education Division as a whole. These lecturers enhance the teaching-learning process as they are practitioners in the world of teaching besides being privy to experiential learning as they have often worked for many years as teacher educators. OUM's academic community of about 10,000 tutors has not only included personnel from the Institutes of Education and its shareholders, the eleven public universities, but also from the other public and private universities and practitioners from the industries, who have provided the impetus for variations in learning.

Methodology

Feedback from the teachers who had attended the programmes regarding the quality of the teaching learning, the modules, the learner management system,

assessment and perception about the total programme was obtained using the survey method. The questionnaire approach was used and descriptive statistics was utilized. A questionnaire was printed on the OMR sheets and was used to collect the data. The response format for the items in each section was the level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 to 5 with 5 rated as 'strongly agree' and 1 for "strongly disagree"). The evaluation was conducted by the university in the May/2009 semester where the total number of teachers was 11044 throughout the whole country. The sample for this study was obtained using the stratified random sampling technique according to the six geographical zones in the country.

Open University Malaysia has 61 learning centres throughout the country and the administrators were employed to administer the questionnaire during one of the tutorial sessions. The questionnaires were then returned to the Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation, Open University Malaysia, for data entry and analysis.

Findings & Discussions

The adoption of the blended mode of learning which the Open University Malaysia has used since its inception leverages on information and communication technology (ICT), using the Learning Management System, e-learning, the modules, the digital library, iRadio and mobile learning which represent an important part of its strategy to reach out to the working adults.

The four areas in the questionnaire focused on these areas, namely the teaching and learning, modules, the Learning Management System and the assessment system. The respondents had responded positively to these areas and this reinforces the type of approach assumed by the university in its approach to teacher enhancement and upgrading.

As both the traditional classroom learning and online delivery learning have offered strengths and weaknesses, it is useful to combine the strengths of the two methods into what has been termed as blended learning. Blended learning applies to the use of technology in the physical classroom learning and the teacher programme was delivered through this approach. Our posit was that the effective leaning process does not take place by merely injecting technology into the blended mode of the delivery, but through the combination of the following elements:

- a) Teaching and learning
- b) Module
- c) Learner Management System
- d) Assessment
- e) The structure of the whole programme itself

OUM has conducted a comprehensive survey among the learners to determine the extent of how much the students of this programme were satisfied with the quality of the above elements. In general, the students were happy with the all of the above dimensions which were elaborated in the research. Under the section on the Quality of Teaching and Learning, it was found that 72.8% of the respondents rated this component as good while 15.1% rated it as being very good. 12.1% of the respondents classified this component as being of average quality. None of the respondents rated this component negatively and this meant that the emphasis that OUM places on its tutors was not misplaced. Frequent seminars provided to enhance the quality of tutoring has played an important role in maintaining the standard expected of its tutors.

The self-learning modules which are provided for all the OUM learners constitute an important element in OUM's blended pedagogy. There were seven items which constituted this component and it was found that 59.2% of the respondents rated the quality as being very good while 6.8% said that it was good. 29.7% rated OUM's modules as average while out of the 4.4% of the respondents, 4.2% found the modules as being poor and 0.2% found it very poor. This could be due to the fact that learners could have been used to the traditional form of the face-to-face lecture sessions rather than the on-line tutoring system with the fortnightly face-to-face sessions in the blended pedagogy.

The respondents were asked to provide feedback on the overall quality of the myLMS. Overall 64.2% of the respondents found the learning platform application as being good, while 10.5% rated it as "very good". However, 21.7% found the application to be average and 3.5% were dissatisfied with the quality (0.5% found it "very poor" while 3.2% "poor"). On the overall rating for the quality of assessment, the majority of the respondents was satisfied with 62.2% finding it good. 9.4% thought it was very good while 26.7% rated it as average but 1.7% of the respondents rated the assessment system as being "poor" (1.5%) and "very poor" (0.2%). Finally, 79.7% of the respondents felt satisfied with the total programme. 67% of them rated it as 'good' while 12.7% found it "very good". However, 19.9% of the respondents found the programme to be average whereas 0.4% of them found it dissatisfactory.

Nevertheless, there exists room for improvement especially in the areas of the teaching and learning module, learner management system and assessment. The university is currently revamping the delivery aspects of these components to make it more effective for the learning process as it has been described earlier.

The research also has provides an excellent framework to rate open distance learning universities under the Malaysia's MQA (Malaysian Qualification Agency) Rating System for Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia (SETARA). SETARA was implemented by using a rating mechanism to measure the performance of undergraduate teaching and learning in universities and university colleges in

Malaysia. Unfortunately, it does not have a mechanism to rate open and distance learning institutions (ODLI). Thus, the methodology/framework discussed in this research can be used as the guideline for the ODLI rating purposes in Malaysia.

The SETARA was an exercise carried out by the Ministry of Higher Education to measure the quality and prestige of universities and university colleges in Malaysia. SETARA was first carried out in 2007 on 20 public universities by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). In 2009, the rating exercise involved 58 public and private universities and university colleges. The main focus of SETARA, then, was to measure the quality of teaching and learning at undergraduate level. Supervised by an independent committee that was selected by the Malaysian Qualification Agency, SETARA was based on twenty five criteria which were reflected in the 82 indicators covering three generic dimensions of input, process and output to assess the quality of teaching and learning. The input dimension addressed talent, resources and governance while the process dimension focused on curriculum and the output dimension on the quality of graduates.

The SETARA exercise used a six tier category ranging from 1 to 6 with Tier 6 being identified as “outstanding” and tier 1 as “weak”. The final results showed that out of 47 universities and university colleges, none were in Tier 6; 18 universities achieved a Tier 5 category; 25 institutions in Tier 4 and the remaining four in Tier 3. No institutions were rated in Tiers 1 or 2. Eleven of the participating institutions did not receive a rating as they were new institutions without final year students and had not produced graduates or do not offer undergraduate programmes or they are non-conventional institutions. Open University Malaysia was placed under this category.

The eighteen Universities which had attained Tier 5 or “Excellent” institutions received incentives like being able to enroll local and foreign government sponsored students, and have access to government

Conclusion

It is felt that a programme that reaches teachers in their schools should make it possible for learners to integrate what they learn with the day-to-day practices in the schools, thus bridging the relationship between theory and practice. However, as more teachers gain tertiary qualifications, the focus now tends to shift towards the improvement of quality. Monitoring and evaluation are an integral part of the management of quality and quality assurance. Judgement about the quality of distance education programmes for teachers comes from the many sources and may coincide or vary based on the different criteria adhered to in defining quality.

Some distance education programmes for teacher education work to at least two sets of quality standards, which are national standards and internal institutional standards with varying degrees of definition. Other programmes work to international standards alone or set their own quality assurance standards and

procedures, and are subject to standards set for the national education standards at the end of the programme. Quality standards for teacher education often tend to be less explicit.

More and better evaluation and research is needed on the use and effects of distance education for both initial teacher training and continuing professional development. Little evaluation is accorded to programmes offered by the distance education mode as it is difficult to say with certainty what affects the open and distance learning mode has had on learning. This explains the reasons why the SETARA has accorded OUM as an institution which cannot be rated due to insufficient data, in other words, an institution which did not fall within the criteria set for classification.

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