

**EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF LEARNING:
EXCELLENT LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION
AT OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**



ABOUT THE COMPANY

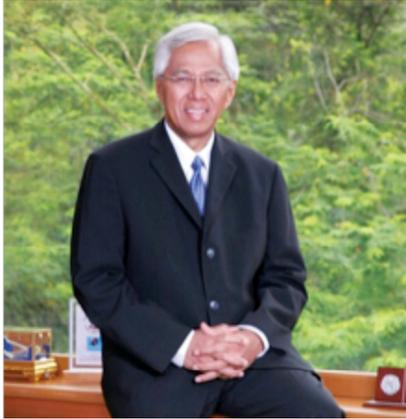
Today, we are living in the age of accelerating change where knowledge and skills can quickly become obsolete. “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave”, the quote attributed to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad S.A.W., undoubtedly signifies the importance of lifelong learning. Continuous building of knowledge and skills throughout the life of an individual is the cornerstone of Open University Malaysia’s (OUM) existence.

OUM is the first and one of the most prominent learning institutions in Malaysia that provide lifelong learning from the perspective of tertiary and post-tertiary levels of study. With specific attention to the educational needs of working adults, OUM plays a significant role in championing the cause of lifelong learning and helping people to realize their ambitions of attending higher education. This is consistent with the National Blueprint on “Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia: 2011-2020”, making lifelong learning a part of the Malaysian learning culture. OUM is already on the frontline of open and distance learning (ODL) and the only ODL university to provide modules.

This article is intended to share OUM best practices that lead to its excellent performance. Emphasis is given from the perspective of the outstanding business excellence attributes. The article highlights the best practices on how leaders develop and facilitate the achievement of the mission and vision and develop values required for long term success. Adoption of technological tools and innovations, offering flexibility in learning and providing a conducive learning environment, are visibly demonstrated through the university’s commitment to excellence and continuous improvement.

THE EXCELLENT JOURNEY OF “A UNIVERSITY FOR ALL “

“I wish it could have been earlier” was commented by the OUM Vice-Chancellor, Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Anuwar Ali, when asked about the establishment of OUM with the motto of “A University for All”. Around 15 or 20 years ago, chances for a school leaver to enter the university were less than now. “OUM is an open and distance learning institution dedicated to enhancing the opportunity of those without the tertiary education to enter university,” he added.



OUM’s credo of being a university for all has been opening doors for Malaysians for many years. The university was established in 2000 under a consortium called METEOR Sdn Bhd, together with other 11 public universities. OUM belongs to UNITEM Sdn Bhd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of METEOR. It is the first ODL university in the country. OUM’s vision is “to be the leading provider of flexible learning” while its mission statements are to widen access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities by leveraging on technology, adopting flexible modes of learning and providing a conducive and engaging learning environment at a competitive and affordable cost.

OUM provides ample opportunities for Malaysians to improve themselves through good tertiary education, extensive networking and a chance to learn from the professionals. The university shared values are integrity, professionalism, caring, teamwork and innovativeness. Adopting the motto “A University for All,” OUM believes in the democratisation of education, giving everyone a chance at self-actualisation and fulfilling their potential.

Through the years, the university has witnessed the success of its endeavours. Since it began operations in 2001, the university has experienced rapid expansion in terms of numbers of programmes, learners and staff. Currently, OUM has admissions of more than 150,000 learners from various professions such as teachers, nurses, civil servants, private sector employees and members of the armed forces.

From an initial four academic programmes when it first opened its doors to learners in 2001, OUM has come a long way, currently offering close to 70 programmes at Diploma, Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral levels. These programmes are meant for working adults who want to upgrade their skills and knowledge for career progression or transition, or who simply wish to fulfil an ambition of lifelong learning.

OUM has made great strides on the global front with its international presence in 10 countries with 12 international partners across Asia, Africa and Europe, which is an indication of the university's status as a reputable institution of higher learning education. Some of the developing countries include Bahrain, Philippines, Vietnam and the Mauritius. This number is growing and aligning with the university's future plan to expand locally and globally.

In 2014, OUM celebrated the graduation of its international learners at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTEC) in Vietnam and at Villa College in the Maldives. OUM international networking efforts were also intensified through the co-organisation of international events and conferences.



OUM's excellent business results for revenue and profit show a positive trend, increasing from 2011 to 2013. The growing number of learners signifies customer acceptance and satisfaction. OUM strength lies in the dedicated 120 faculty members and near 450 administrative and support staff. With an excellent leadership and work culture, OUM is one of the best places to work, which is reflected in the employee satisfaction and their loyalty to OUM.

By emphasizing quality at the heart of everything it does, OUM continues to receive many accolades, which is also the hallmark of its excellent performance. OUM has won many prestigious awards for its contributions to higher learning. Among them are the Award of Excellence for Institutional Achievement in Distance Education in 2010, Silver Award for the Employer of Choice Category during the 11th Malaysia Human Resource Awards in 2011, SEAMO-Jasper Award in 2012, Putra Brand Awards in Education and Learning in 2013 and Industry Excellent Award (Education and Services) in 2014.

To date, OUM has a total of 34 learning centres nationwide, a sign of OUM's increasing popularity in Malaysia. In 2014, OUM introduced open courses that can be undertaken by anyone without having to enrol as a learner. With more than 57,000 graduates of the young and old both able and physically disabled; to teachers, senior citizens, members of the armed forces and even prison inmates, OUM is truly a "A University for All".

FLEXIBLE LEARNING AT A GREATER HEIGHT

To widen access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities by adopting flexible modes of learning is one of the missions at OUM. This mission is clearly translated into best practices at the strategic and operational level. Flexibility provided by OUM transpires from the flexible entry system and flexibility in student administrative matters and the learning approach.

The flexible entry system is an alternative path to gain entry into OUM's academic programmes through less restrictive entry requirements compared with conventional university entries. It leverages on an individual's prior learning acquired through formal/informal training, life or work experience as an alternative to academic qualifications.

"Flexibility also means allowing learners to drop and continue their studies the following semester, transfer to another centre if learners shift jobs and move to another state, arranging exams at another centre if learners happen to be in another city during the exam week and flexibility in terms of allowing staggered payments. This is in the spirit of our understanding that being working adults, they have other responsibilities," said Tan Sri.

OUM practices a blended pedagogy that comprises self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorials and online learning. Self-managed learning gives the freedom for learners to progress at their own pace with the help of learning materials in the form of printed modules or text books. Other learning materials provided may include electronic content accessible through the OUM web portal and CD-ROM. Face-to-face tutorials, seminars or sessions are provided where learners and tutors meet regularly at a common venue (learning centre) and at scheduled times.

Tutors and facilitators are responsible for ensuring learners understand the subject matter. Meanwhile, online learning allows learners and tutors to communicate, exchange ideas and share information between peers using the online forum and to access course materials and e-content. Apart from flexibility, the blended learning approach intensifies quality and the learning experience and improves learner satisfaction. At its essence, blended learning provides quality in education.

LEVERAGING ON TECHNOLOGY FOR QUALITY, FLEXIBILITY AND LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

On the technological front, OUM continues to explore ways to enhance its delivery methods as well as its teaching and learning approach through the use of technology. Consistent with the OUM mission statement, quality education and flexible learning are made possible at OUM through heavily leveraging the technology. Capturing advantage from the high penetration rate of mobile phone subscriptions in Malaysia, OUM embarked on a Mobile Learning via SMS initiative in 2009 in an effort to support distance learners who are mostly working adults.



Its internally developed online learning portal, my Virtual Learning Environment (myVLE), provides facilities for learners to download the learning materials and participate in the online discussion forums, which enables them to learn outside the classroom. OUM is the first university in Malaysia with learning materials on iTunes U and course materials on the OUM App. The OUM application for mobile learning has successfully enhanced the blend of learning modes at OUM, extending the learning space, increasing the flexibility of learning offered to learners and encouraging ubiquitous learning where learners can learn just-in-time, anytime and anywhere.

Access to a multitude of learning resources exposes learners to an excellent, enriching and engaging learning experience. It helps to sustain the distance learners who are likely to feel isolated and alienated because of a lack of interaction and communication with fellow learners, tutors and the university as compared to those in traditional universities.

Technology assists in bridging the transactional distances faced by the learners. By providing a higher level of support to the learners and engaging them psychologically, OUM has been able to reduce the student attrition rate. Apart from the benefits of possible successful retention and progress of a learner in his/her studies, it is a great investment in terms of ensuring learner success and satisfaction. Helping even a single learner to enjoy and succeed in learning is what counts for a responsible distance education provider.

For quality, using technology to provide innovation and facilitate learning is producing quality graduates. Meanwhile, other dimension of support, such the learning activities coordination support for the tutors and administrative support for the OUM administrator, help to improve OUM's operational efficiencies in the core processes. Reaching more learners in a shorter time and with increased accuracy is reflected in increased productivity, which typically leads to a reduction in operational cost.

QUALITY EDUCATION AND FLEXIBILITY AT AN AFFORDABLE PRICE: WHAT MAKES IT POSSIBLE AT OUM?

“The higher education landscape in Malaysia is constantly evolving. Public and private institutions vie for the prestige of becoming the institution of choice among the Malaysian public as well as for those beyond our shores. Online learning, blended pedagogies and web-based platforms, previously used only by ODL institutions, are now being explored by other higher education institutions as well,” said Tan Sri.

A complex array of forces, such as new delivery technologies, changing demographics and a global economy, is creating a new competitive landscape for higher education providers and OUM is no exception. OUM has proven to be responding well to the ever changing competitive landscape in higher education and remains resilient and successful in the industry. One of the excellent business practices is in the leadership that holds to the lucid, coherent and meaningful vision and mission of OUM. These have clearly spelled out the context in which OUM operates and have provided indicators of the direction in which OUM moves to actualize the goals.

Through leveraging technology, flexible modes of learning and a conducive and engaging learning environment, OUM embodies the spirit of excellent quality and flexibility at an affordable cost. At OUM, the vision and mission are cascaded down from top management, well understood by employees at all levels and effectively translated into operations strategy.

Top management ensures that every decision made is aligned and in concert with the OUM vision and mission. OUM’s governance structure helps management demonstrate accountability and transparency as well as protect stakeholders’ interests. Staying true to the vision and mission blends well for listening to the voice of the customer (which is the learner) and the voice of business.

“Compared to the conventional universities, we have extra challenges as our students are all over the country and with various natures and profiles. We feel that we must spend a lot of time to enhance the quality of learning and its processes,” said Tan Sri.

At OUM, the quality of the learning environment is further enhanced through the establishment of the Institute for Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA). ITLA was established with the aim of promoting enhanced student learning through the development of scholarly teaching, assessment and curricula design. The quality of service delivery is controlled through an effective monitoring system and inspection mechanism.

OUM also has a clear system of selection and appointment of part-time tutors. Initiatives to maintain academic quality include a rigorous process of appointment, a lecturer monitoring system and evaluations by learners. Systematic reviews by administration and external parties such as MQA ensure that OUM's operations and services meet the regulatory requirements. "For me, all things we do are geared towards quality," added Tan Sri.

Since the first intake in 2001, OUM has increased the tuition fees only once in 2012. Considering the tremendous improvements in the quality of instructors, significantly improved learning materials and multiple resource offerings in learning technology, one might wonder how OUM keeps its operating costs at a minimum. According to Tan Sri, OUM has been continuously improving operational efficiency and productivity.

OUM maintains a lean organization that involves a lot of staff multitasking and redeployment. One of the initiatives that affect the financial performance is utilizing lecturers from other public universities as well as other professionals as part-time lecturers. The outsourcing measures have significantly reduced the direct expenses. The application of various technologies has significantly reduced the dependency on face-to face meetings and streamlined the internal operations.

Due to the increase in the number of learners, OUM has achieved the economies of scale where the university is able to spread numerous fixed costs such as for learning materials development, learning centres and tutors. Meanwhile, the self-developed Learning Management System (LMS) and its effectiveness have even attracted a university in Saudi Arabia to buy the system. This generates OUM revenue derived from non-academic programmes.

With the firm belief that an organisation is only as strong as its people, OUM continues to invest in capacity building efforts. New staffs are provided with a familiarization briefing to acquaint them with the workings of the university and are sent to staff retreat programmes at outdoor locations to build their knowledge and rapport. In addition, both academic and non-academic employees at the non-executive, executive and managerial levels are offered training programmes that suit their job descriptions.

Teambuilding programmes are conducted for all staff on a quarterly basis and “train the trainer” sessions are held for staff in supervisory positions. “Through this capacity building and frequent communication with staff, we inject the spirit of integrity, professionalism, caring, teamwork and innovativeness. Only through these shared values can staff carry out the organization’s creed and motto,” said Tan Sri.

Another excellent business initiative is the use of balanced scorecard methodology and the ICEMS (budget system) for budgeting and planning. Performance reports are sent to the Board of Directors on a quarterly basis. The methodology and system are used to align university activities with the vision and strategy and to monitor performance against strategic goals. When asked how OUM ensures the various staffs are innovative and work in rhythm with the management aspirations, Tan Sri repeatedly said “the bonus system and incentives. We practice a performance-based system.”

MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

“Quality, learner-centeredness and innovation will continue to be the focus of our work culture,” remarked Tan Sri. In a prospective view, OUM sees that human resources are particularly crucial as the university must rely on the collective experience, teamwork and contribution of each individual who identifies as a part of OUM. The university will leverage its status as an ODL institution to champion lifelong learning in Malaysia. OUM will play an active role in fulfilling new initiatives and focus areas of the National Education Blueprint on Higher Education. OUM will make relentless efforts to provide accessible, affordable and flexible learning opportunities that emphasize quality in all aspects of provision, from enhancement of programmes and learning materials to the establishment of new learning centres.

Giving back to society continues to be a priority of OUM. The corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda is planned and conducted through Yayasan Canselor OUM. This foundation was established in 2006 with the primary mission of promoting excellence in teaching and learning, research, culture and arts in line with the government's policy for a caring society through lifelong learning.

Its activities include providing scholarships, awards, research grants, fee discounts to senior citizens and physically disabled learners, fee exemption scheme for excellent students and a scholarships programme for single mothers. OUM is not only committed towards providing opportunities for people from all walks of life to pursue higher education; it also plays an integral role in instilling the love for knowledge among the younger generation.