

**Enhancing the Quality of the Teaching Profession:
Partnership between Open University Malaysia and
the Ministry of Education, Malaysia**

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ABSTRACT

Teacher training and education is an imperative target for many nations including Malaysia. The Ministry of Education (MOE) takes a serious stand in the issue of teacher quality and qualification; with the introduction of the Special Degree Programme for Non-Graduate and In-Service Teachers to upgrade their academic qualifications. Open University Malaysia (OUM) has been chosen to be the partner in this programme, under which the university has successfully produced about 11,200 graduate teachers during the last eight years. This paper illustrates the salient features of the OUM-MOE partnership that was, from the outset, strategically planned on the basic need to achieve quality education for the teaching profession. Thus, all aspects of the delivery system have been tailored towards this important imperative which includes the adoption of OUM's blended pedagogy.

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It is also in this context that the leveraging on information and communication technology (ICT), via OUM's Learning Management System (myLMS), e-learning, iRadio and digital library, has become a significant component of the teaching and learning process. In a nutshell, this paper thus highlights how open and distance learning (ODL), through its flexibility and accessibility, has been able to benefit training and education as well as enable MOE to save substantial costs on every teacher trained. To ensure the success of this OUM-MOE partnership, the university gives emphasis on the principal objective of this enterprise so as to instil professionalism, commitment, good ethics and quality awareness in teachers, thus contributing to the enhancement of the country's education sector.

1. Introduction

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was set up in 2000 with the objective of offering open and distance learning (ODL). Established under a consortium of 11 public or state-owned universities, OUM is indeed a unique experiment as it operates as a private education provider, but owned by the said public universities. With its first intake of only 753 learners in August 2001, it now has a total enrolment of about 90,000 learners. To date, OUM has produced some 13,000 graduates with another batch of 7,000 to receive their scrolls in November this year. The Faculty of Education and Languages (FEL) is one of the most important faculties with the largest number of learners in the university. Altogether OUM has trained about 35,000 in-service teachers, mainly those who are diploma holders, under the OUM-Ministry of Education (MOE) partnership.

The purpose of this paper is to look at how OUM manages its teacher training programmes and the reasons behind its success as one of the main providers of teacher training and teacher education in the country. What differentiates OUM from other institutions of higher learning in the country, both public and private alike, is the sheer number of learners who have enrolled at the university within a very short span of time, which is in the first eight years of its operations. Equally important is the adoption of OUM's blended mode of learning which allows the OUM-MOE partnership to leverage on information and communication technology (ICT) via the introduction of OUM's Learning Management System (myLMS), e-learning, the digital library, iRadio and mobile learning as well. The learning process is based on the notion of flexibility, accessibility and affordability, which together ensures a winning formula for the OUM-MOE partnership.

2. The Faculty's Leading Role in the Partnership

The Faculty of Education and Languages (FEL) was set up with the aim of providing open tertiary education to fresh school leavers and working adults through ODL. With the current strength of 16 faculty members, the areas of studies which the faculty covers include education, languages and related social science subjects.

The programmes offered by the faculty are:

- *Diploma in Early Childhood Education;*
- *Bachelor of Education with Honours (TESL);*
- *Bachelor of Education (Educational Administration) with Honours;*
- *Bachelor of Teaching (Primary Education) with Honours;*
- *Bachelor of Teaching (Pre-school Education) with Honours;*
- *Bachelor of English Studies with Honours;*
- *Master of Instructional Design and Technology;*
- *Master of Education; and*
- *Doctor of Philosophy (Education).*

The partnership with MOE constitutes an integral part of the Ministry's plan to ensure that at least 50% of teachers in primary schools will possess the minimum of a Bachelor's degree qualification by 2010. As reported in the Mid-Term Review of the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), this figure stood at 13.7% in 2007. With RM577.7

million (equivalent to USD164 million) allocated for the Special Degree Programme for Non-Graduate Teachers in the said Plan, it is clear that the upgrading of in-service teachers is thus considered a critical component of modernising the Malaysian educational sector; and will continue to come hand-in-hand with ever-changing global trends and sectoral restructuring of the national economy.

One important approach to improve the academic standards of primary schools is by upgrading the academic qualifications of its teachers. The standard of primary schools has been a recurrent issue in Malaysian education; whereby the success rates, academic achievements and communication skills of the pupils have been directly correlated with the quality of the teaching staff. While some of the existing primary school teachers have obtained degrees from local universities through distance education, a large number of them remain as non-graduates.

FEL, in partnership with the Teachers Education Division, MOE, was given the task of training in-service primary school teachers who fall in the second category, namely non-graduates or those who only have diploma level qualification. These teachers will enrol into two specific degree programmes, which are the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary Education) (BTPE) and Bachelor of Teaching (Pre-school Education) (BTPS). These programmes have been specifically designed for primary school teachers to ensure that at graduation, they would have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills in these fields.

The integrated approach of the curricula for both these programmes is designed to increase the learner's skills and pedagogical verve so as to be able to stimulate learners' intellectual interests in fourteen major and sixteen minor subjects (see Appendix

1), thereby giving them a sufficient level of confidence and sense of professionalism in their careers as educationists themselves.

Prior to the upgrading of programmes for primary school teachers, OUM has also had a similar programme for secondary school teachers. The programmes were:

- Bachelor of Education with Honours (TESL);
- Bachelor of Education with Honours (Science);
- Bachelor of Education with Honours (Mathematics);
- Bachelor of Education with Honours (Civil Engineering);
- Bachelor of Education with Honours (Mechanical Engineering);
and Bachelor of Education with Honours (Electrical Engineerin

The following are current figures for all programmes in the OUM-MOE partnership:

<i>Enrolment:</i>	
<i>a. Bachelor of Teaching (Primary Education) (BTPE)</i>	<i>16,206</i>
<i>b. Bachelor of Teaching (Pre-school Education) (BTPS)</i>	<i>877</i>
<i>c. Bachelor of Education with Honours (TESL)</i>	<i>1,661</i>
<i>d. Bachelor of Education with Honours (Science)</i>	<i>1,906</i>
<i>e. Bachelor of Education with Honours (Mathematics)</i>	<i>2,128</i>
<i>f. Bachelor of Education with Honours (Civil Engineering)</i>	<i>149</i>
<i>g. Bachelor of Education with Honours (Mechanical Engineering)</i>	<i>191</i>
<i>h. Bachelor of Education with Honours (Electrical Engineering)</i>	<i>69</i>

<i>Total enrolment of teachers (primary and secondary)</i>	23,187
<i>Latest batch to enrol in the September 2009 Semester (expected)</i>	5,000
<i>First batch to graduate for BTPE and BTPS (final semester in September 2009)</i>	3,200
<i>Total graduates (estimated)</i>	11,200

**All figures as at the September 2009 semester*

3. The Learning Process: A Blended Approach

From its inception, OUM has adopted a ‘blended’ approach of learning which employs multi-mode strategies. It combines online learning – using the latest in ICT – with traditional methods of teaching such as face-to-face interaction and classroom-type tutorials. This blended mode is designed to provide learners with the best of both worlds; by giving them a high level of attention and guidance parallel to that of an actual classroom situation, as well as the flexibility and freedom of learning at one’s own pace through online and virtual learning facilities. This blended pedagogy is a focal point in ODL, aligned to the university’s mission of making higher education accessible to anyone, anywhere; particularly for working adults and teachers – who make up the majority of the learners at OUM.

OUM’s learners are also provided with modules for self-managed learning. To further enforce the learning process, they are required to attend tutorial classes that are held every fortnight at the nearest learning centre. This means that learners do not have to travel far because they are more than 60 learning centres nationwide to choose from (Figure 1). When not

attending classes, they should be actively involved in online forums set up by myLMS, to keep in close contact with their tutors and fellow learners.

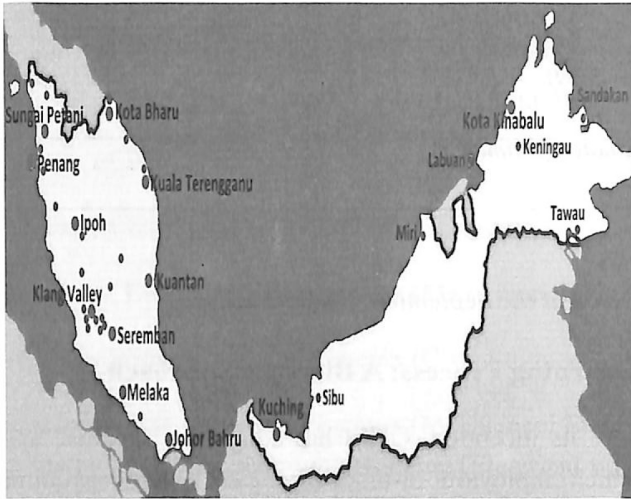


Figure 1: Locations of OUM's Learning Centres

Being an ODL institution, OUM also relies on technologies to further enhance the learning experience for the learners. While some learners might easily adapt to e-learning, others need more guidance and support. OUM's introductory "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners" course has been designed with a special module that aims to provide understanding of e-learning for those new to this approach. By making this course compulsory to all new learners, OUM tries to give them a strong foundation to begin their studies through ODL. Some of the technological innovations that have also been adopted at OUM include iRadio, a well-equipped Digital Library and mobile learning (m-learning).

iRadio is the nation's first internet radio station that is produced and managed by a university. It streams module-related and infotainment

programmes that can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days a week; and even includes podcasts and audio downloads; thus allowing learners to listen to any of the programmes during their own spare time. To date, OUM's Digital Library houses over 28,000 books, 72,000 e-books, 29,000 e-journals and about 2.4 million e-thesis titles. All these resources are available for viewing by any learner with an Internet connection. M-learning is OUM's latest initiative in the technological foray; and we have begun this approach by sending reminders, motivational and educational text messages to all learners who have enrolled into the compulsory "Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners" course.

These technologies represent an important part of OUM's strategy to reach out to our learners so that there are no barriers to education and educational resources. This is of particular significance to learners and teachers located in remote areas throughout Malaysia.

4. Benefiting from the Strategic Partnership

While studying at OUM, teachers can still continue to serve at their respective schools without having to take an extended period of study leave as often happens if they are to enrol in conventional universities. To a large extent, this provides an avenue for MOE to maximise the utilisation of their school teachers whilst the latter are enrolled as part-time learners in OUM's programmes. The learning mode adopted by OUM allows for the teachers to read course materials either online or in the form of printed modules at their own leisure. While there are no formal or intensive lectures as in the conventional sense, they can interact with their peers and tutors through an online forum (within myLMS) in order to gain more depth and exposure on the content of their courses. This is the interactive component of the learning process which certainly

enriches the learning experience of the learner as well as the tutor.

Since tutorial classes are only held fortnightly during weekends, their normal work schedules during the week are thus not affected. Furthermore, these tutorials are conducted only during the first and third Saturdays or Sundays of the month, thereby leaving the other two alternate Saturdays or Sundays free for them to participate in extracurricular and social or family activities.

Since the teachers are not required to go on study leave, there is no necessity for the MOE to appoint relief teachers to replace those going for further studies at OUM. It is for this very reason that a larger number of teachers can be targeted for selection to pursue higher academic qualifications under OUM's flexible learning mode. Apart from the teachers in schools that are located either in large or small urban centres or nearby villages (which are accessible to OUM's learning centres), a total of about 400 teachers in remotest areas, especially in Sabah and Sarawak (two states in the island of Borneo) have been able to enrol in OUM under this flexible arrangement.

A considerable number of OUM's part-time tutors are lecturers who work at various Teachers Education Institutes (TEIs) throughout the nation. Their deployment by OUM can be seen as a form of capacity building for their own respective careers and these institutes as well. This is another important by-product of the partnership which enriches the academic experience of MOE and OUM as well. By utilising the expertise of these lecturers either as subject-matter-experts (SMEs) or tutors, OUM thus enhances the quality of teaching and dissemination of knowledge. Like most ODL institutions worldwide, OUM leverages on the strength of the wide experience of thousands of faculty members from

other universities to assist us in terms of the academic input in teaching and learning. OUM, with a total of over 8,500 tutors nationwide, has therefore been able to galvanise the academic community of not only our consortium universities but also those from other public and private universities.

In addition, some TEIs derive tangible benefits from the OUM-MOE partnership by means of new computer laboratories and other teaching equipments. OUM currently rents 27 TEIs to be used as learning centres during the weekends. In lieu of rent, OUM has done extensive upgrading of the classrooms and equipped them with computers and LCD projectors.

Studies conducted on OUM's teacher training programmes reveal that the level of satisfaction among the learners is very high because of several strengths embodied in this partnership. Among these are the availability of and easy access to learning centres throughout the country, state-of-the-art facilities, reputable faculty members and accreditation received by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (formerly known as the National Accreditation Board). Success rate amongst learners is also excellent, with generally high passing rates and only a very small percentage obtaining below 2.0 CGPAs. What this means is that the programmes and the teachers enrolled into these programmes are doing well. OUM believes that this initiative will always be relevant, both to the institution and the nation.

The experience gained from the OUM-MOE partnership since 2002 has paved the way for promoting Bachelor of Education programmes overseas as part of our internationalisation drive. The university's first success story with respect to international teacher training programmes is the partnership with Villa College, a higher education institution located in Malé, the Maldives. The OUM-Villa College collaboration, which kicked off in September 2008 with

the offering of three of our undergraduate Education programmes, now has a student enrolment of about 200 teachers. This initiative is in line with the nation's objective of becoming a regional centre of educational excellence by exporting Malaysia's educational services.

Unlike all the traditional campus universities which are encouraged to enrol foreign students to study in Malaysia, OUM, given its flexibility and its blended pedagogy with the emphasis on ICT utilisation, has been able to locate a number of its learning centres in other countries such as Yemen, Bahrain and Singapore in collaboration with local educational institutions. Soon, we hope that our partnerships with the Accra Institute of Technology of Ghana and Hanoi University of Vietnam will materialise with the establishment of our learning centres in these two countries. Unlike our programmes in the Maldives, all our other overseas programmes are at the Master's or Ph.D. levels in business administration and information technology (IT).

Another significant milestone for OUM in terms of forging collaboration in the area of ICT development is the partnership between OUM and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) during the last two years. Under this partnership, OUM with the technical backup of its sister company, METEOR Technology and Consultancy Sdn Bhd, have established the National e-Learning Centre in Riyadh with the objective of promoting e-Learning in all the KSA universities via the training of faculty members and IT staff of these universities and the development of courses utilising e-content.

5. Moving Forward on a Firm Foundation

From the strong foundation that has been established since the OUM-MOE partnership was initiated some years ago, the university is

confident that this partnership will gain from strength to strength if the objective of quality education is sustained. In doing this, we have to face all the challenges ahead with appropriate strategies and innovate ideas to improve the delivery system. An integral component of teaching and learning is the learning materials, and in the case of OUM, the modules. Getting the modules written, printed and delivered on time are among the challenges faced in this respect. This onerous task is handled by the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CiDT) which employs a staff of about 60 including editors, instructional designers, desktop publishers, multimedia programmers and graphic designers, working together to produce over 700 modules required for all the courses at OUM.

The appointment of tutors is also another concern that needs close monitoring especially in the selection process; all the more because they are part-timers and are sourced from many universities, both public (including TEIs) and private. The management of such a large number of tutors, currently more than 8,500 for the whole country, is handled by the Centre for Tutor Management and Development (CTMD). It is thus the responsibility of CTMD to ascertain that only those who are qualified and well-versed in ODL are selected as tutors at OUM. Continuous training for these tutors has become an important aspect of CTMD's annual activities.

The main challenges for the Bachelor of Teaching programme for teachers in remote areas are as follows:

- a. The need to develop and maintain alternative communication channels between the Faculty/Learning Centres and the learners since the latter do not have easy access to the Internet, telephone lines and postal services;
- b. The need to ensure that formal tutorial classes and

study review sessions for the students organised at six Learning Centres during school vacations are really effective in helping them with the study materials; and

- c. The need to ensure that the distribution of modules and the submission of assignments for concurrent semesters are systematically done when learners report for tutorial classes and attend study review sessions.

6. Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt that the OUM-MOE partnership has provided in-service teachers with access to higher education; an opportunity that has presented itself through MOE's sponsorship as well as the flexibility of ODL. Through this partnership, OUM is thus contributing to fulfil the nation's target of equipping thousands of the country's primary and secondary school teachers with a university qualification. Like all OUM's academic programmes, quality is the main hallmark in this programme, and the quality in OUM's education-based programmes will not be compromised; as they are closely monitored by at least three government agencies: the MOE (through its Teachers Education Division), Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and the stakeholders of OUM itself.

While much can be contributed to MOE's hands-on approach to teacher training and education, OUM's blended learning pedagogy, with special reference to e-learning and information technologies have made the partnership truly feasible for all parties. The flexible and accessible e-learning platform at OUM allows for the diffusion of technological awareness and has provided many practical applications that have proved essential in the deployment of our Education programmes for teachers. It is hoped that OUM will still

continue to contribute towards the Ministry's principal objective of enhancing the quality of the teaching profession in the years to come.

Appendix 1

**Major Subjects for Bachelor of Teaching (Primary Education) (BTPE)
with Honours:**

1. Malay Language
2. English Language
3. Chinese Language
4. Tamil Language
5. Arabic Language
6. Mathematics
7. Science
8. Social Studies
9. Living Skills
10. Visual Art Education
11. Music Education
12. Physical Education
13. Islamic Education
14. Special Education

Minor subjects for **Bachelor of Teaching (Primary Education) (BTPE)**
with Honours:

1. Malay Language
2. English Language
3. Chinese Language
4. Tamil Language
5. Arabic Language
6. Mathematics
7. Science
8. Social Studies
9. Living Skills
10. Visual Art Education
11. Music Education
12. Physical Education
13. Islamic Education
14. Quranic Education
15. Moral Education
16. Health Education

Major subject for Bachelor of Teaching (Pre-school Education) (BTPS) with Honours:

1. Pre-school Education

Minor subjects for Bachelor of Teaching (Pre-school Education) (BTPS) with Honours:

1. English Language
2. Mathematics
3. Science
4. Visual Art Education
5. Music Education
6. Physical Education
7. Islamic Education
8. Quranic Education
9. Moral Education
10. Health Education

Appendix 2

OUM's Achievements at a Glance

Year	2000	2009
<i>Cumulative Enrolment</i>	753	~90,000
<i>Total Programmes Offered</i>	4	71
<i>Learning Materials Provided (Print & Web-based)</i>	29	600
<i>Learning Centres</i>	12	61
<i>Tutors</i>	100	~8,500
<i>Learners Graduated</i>	-	~20,000