

Issues and Challenges in Islamic Studies VIA Open Distance Learning

Assoc Prof Dr Mohammad Yusuf Ahmad
Faculty of Applied Social Science
Open University Malaysia
Jalan Tun Ismail, 50408
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
Email: mohdyusuf@oum.edu.my
Tel: 603-2773 2734.
Fax: 603-26978812

Abstract

This paper attempts to share with other participants the experience of Open University Malaysia (OUM) in managing a new program in Bachelor of Islamic Studies. What is very particular about the program is that it is being taught in an open and distance learning mode (ODL). Like other Islamic studies program, it covers all subjects related to sharia, management, theology and Arabic. The target groups are those who have diploma qualification from various universities and colleges, as well as first degree holders that are recognised by Malaysian Public Services Department. Most of these students are adult learners who are now working in various government departments and agencies. Apart from that a number of students currently enrolled are admitted through the Open Entry System.

Introduction

Let me first introduce you to the founding philosophy of Open University Malaysia (OUM) particularly with regard to its mission as a learning institution. The motto endorsed by the university is “University for All” embracing the belief that tertiary education is open to all those who are interested in acquiring knowledge. The university was set up in 2001 with the mission of providing a “second” chance to those who have missed the opportunity to study at a university in the past. The mode of delivery is based on Open Distance Learning (ODL). With this in mind, OUM started off with 753 learners in 2001. Today the total enrolment of OUM is 87,000.

Currently there are four faculties in the university, namely Faculty of Education and Languages, Faculty of Business and Administration, Faculty of Science and Technology, Faculty of Information and Communication Technology and Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. There is also a centre for post graduate studies that deals with courses offered at Masters and PhD levels.

The Faculty of Applied Social Sciences

The faculty was first established in September 2007. The faculty adopts an innovative approach in offering programs of studies in social sciences, especially in Islamic studies. What makes the programs quite unique is that the bulk of the course content is applied in nature. As such the scope of study is not restricted to just a single discipline but integrated with other disciplines in order to provide a broad-based learning experience for students. Although learners choose to specialise in a particular academic discipline, they are also exposed to other basic cross-discipline knowledge in humanities and social studies. Hence

students are required to enroll in courses that deal with the nature of social sciences and courses that cover comparative study of culture and society, as well as professional ethics. This kind of exposure is expected to help students gain better insight into real life situations and prepare them with adequate knowledge on how to handle these problems effectively.

In order for graduates to have a broad knowledge of Malaysian society and a good grounding of moral philosophy, the MQA (Malaysian Qualifications Agency) -- a body that keeps track of the quality of university education throughout the country -- requires that students take subjects that deals with Malaysian studies and professional ethics. Apart from that non-Muslims students have to follow a course in moral studies while Muslim students have to sit for Islamic studies course. To improve on their learning skills and their proficiency in English, OUM requires that students take and pass courses that deal with learning skills, communication English, both oral and written.

The faculty initially offers three programs: Bachelor of Islamic Studies (Islamic Management), [Bachelor of Psychology and Bachelor of Communication](#). These programs were first offered in January 2009, that is, sixteen months after the faculty was set up. The number of enrolment for all the three programs was beyond our initial expectation. However, the number of students who signed up for the Bachelor of Psychology program was by far the largest compared to the other two.

Islamic Studies Program

Islamic studies program is among the pioneer programs offered by the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. Two features best describe this program. First, this is the first time ever in Malaysia Islamic studies program is being offered online using ODL mode. As a comparison, other universities in the country are still using conventional method of delivery for Islamic studies. Second, Islamic studies offered by OUM can be considered a class of its own in the sense that it incorporates Islamic management components making the program more relevant to the need of modern administration of Islamic religious institutions in the country.

As for the core components of Islamic studies, students are required to take subjects dealing with Islamic laws covering family laws and criminal laws and the like. Their knowledge in Islamic studies is further strengthened with other subjects like Principles of Aqidah, Principles of Syari'ah, Ulum al-Qur'an, Ulum al-Hadith and Prophet's life and his Leadership Qualities.

For the management component of the program, students are required to take compulsory subjects such as Principles of Islamic Management, Human Resource Management, Principles of Economics, Principles of Marketing, Islamic Financing, Information Technology, Islamic Political System, Approaches to Islamic Communication, and so on.

Being an open and distant learning institution, course materials and learning instructions are delivered online to registered students all over the country. Printed modules are also sent to students, but these are supplemented with other learning materials such as e-modules, and e-books and online publications that are made available through OUM e-library facilities. (B.K. Nigam and Vijay Kumari, 1996).

Challenges to Learning and Teaching of Islamic Studies

While the distribution of printed modules and the incorporation of electronic materials

will help tremendously the learning process in the open and distance learning mode, however, there are some teething problems with Islamic studies. The university has printed a number of modules according to the subject offered for the respective semester. The university has also tried its level best to provide quality modules for students to study. We believe that module will help students in their study. According to B.K. Nigam and Vijay Kumari (1996), it is more helpful to provide students with printed material, so that they can refer to it repeatedly and carry it everywhere, thus it will help them in their study. They do not have to rely all the time on their computer. Instead, they can study anywhere provided that they have the modules with them.

Notwithstanding all this, there are circumstances which modules and e-materials alone could not handle. This is where Islamic studies differ from other subjects. Even though students have the module with them, however, for some other cases they need to have face-to-face consultation in order to obtain precise explanation regarding certain Islamic terminologies, pronunciation of technical terms, because these need live contact with respective lecturers and tutors.

For instance there are terminologies that originate from the Arabic language that cannot be merely deciphered and pronounced precisely based on just a written form. In this case students should be able to listen to an audio format, preferably from a 'live' source such as a tutor or lecturer who should be able to give at the same time an instant feedback on the accuracy of the pronunciation as attempted by the learner. This kind of interactive learning can be conducted in face-to-face typical in a class room situation. However, the sheer number of online students may become a hindrance to effective consultation.

So students need to have face-to-face contact with their tutors. In this case OUM provides them with five tutorial sessions per semester. This has helped students tremendously since any subject can be effectively taught if done through personal contacts (B. K. Nigam and Vijay Kumari, 1996). In the case of Islamic studies, the face-to-face session introduced by OUM is very useful in terms of helping students pronouncing correctly foreign words while at the same time getting instant feedback from the tutors.

Since OUM is catering to the need of a large number of students scattered all over the country, the university is now introducing other formats of ODL materials in order to make learning more interactive. For instance, to help students improve their pronunciation of foreign words and phrases audio features and images are incorporated into special learning materials called "e-modules." This kind of approach has proven to be very helpful in improving the mode of self-learning among online students.

In addition, some subjects make full use of another interactive program called "i-tutorial" whereby tutorial sessions are conducted live from a studio and broadcasted through the internet. Students can either follow the lessons in real time or they can download the tutorial programs later at their own convenience. The advantage of this downloaded programs is that students can access the lessons at their own pace and listen to the content repeatedly as much as they like. To make i-tutorials more interesting, power point slides featuring graphic illustrations and summaries of the lessons, are incorporated into the downloaded materials. Mastering the pronunciation of foreign words can now be achieved at a much faster rate than before.

In terms of exposing the students to the wider academic world, OUM students are encouraged to attend special lectures and seminars, as well as involved themselves in discussion groups. According to Marshall and Frances (1998), sharing learning experiences in discussion group can be a collaborative exploration of ideas which offsets the competitive pressure on the students.

Other than that, discussion group can offer an opportunity for a person to consolidate what one has learned. It can also help to clarify certain ideas and perceptions on a subject or a program that one has taken. Most important of all, discussion groups can stimulate the learning process and help to sort out various problems related to the course requirements, including writing of assignments and preparation for examinations. Through discussions too one can practice the art of communication and further develop critical thinking skills in a group context (Marshall and Frances, 1998).

Conclusion

One of the major challenges faced by OUM, especially by the faculty that offers religious studies online, is how to replace traditional method of teaching with the one that is equally interactive in nature. As commonly experienced, teaching of religious subjects requires a unique pedagogical approach in particular with regard to correct pronunciation of sacred words and perfect reading of the Holy Scriptures. OUM tries to overcome this problem by devising new methods and looking at other alternative approach in order to make learning online even more interesting by using the latest in Internet technology and digital method of delivery. The e-modules and the i-tutorials currently used by the university seemed to have achieved the desired results, but further improvements will be made in order to make online learning very effective.

References

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