

Enriching Learners' Learning Experiences through Virtual Learning Environments in Open University Malaysia

Sub-theme: Innovation in Creation and Use of Content

Ariff Syah Juhari

Siti Farina Sheikh Mohamed

Rosmah Mohamed

Open University Malaysia

Jalan Tun Ismail, 50480 Kuala Lumpur

Phone Number: +60327732431

Fax: +60326978767

Email: ariffsyah@oum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Open University Malaysia (OUM), the country's premier open and distance learning institution has undergone continuous improvements since its establishment in 2000. This paper describes some of the initiatives designed by OUM to support these improvements. The paper provides an overview on the migration and implementation of a new e-learning model that have been executed and progressed since May 2010. This strategic move constitutes the development of web-based modules, e-schedules, i-lectures, online learning resources, online submission and grading of assignments. As do any implementation process of this magnitude, the progress so far came with constraining challenges. This paper further highlights these challenges, and concludes with OUM's provisions to overcome them.

Introduction

Open University Malaysia (OUM), the country's premier open and distance learning institution has undergone continuous improvements since its establishment in 2000. The changes are considered a necessity to ensure OUM produces graduates equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge as well as professional competencies. Since OUM's group of learners is mainly working adult learners who come from different professional backgrounds, three blended modes of delivery are offered to overcome the learner diversity and to minimise challenges. This mode comprises of self-managed learning, face-to-face tutorials (F2F) and online/ e-learning. In recent years, however, OUM has focused on improving its virtual learning environments by looking at various innovative ways to encourage and enrich the learners' online learning experiences. This paper is a conceptual paper which describes several initiatives designed by OUM to enrich learners' learning experiences which include the new e-learning model, development of web-based modules, e-schedules, i-lectures, online learning resources, online submission as well as online grading of assignments.

Initiatives to Enrich Learners' Learning Experiences

OUM has migrated to the **new e-learning model** since May 2010. In this new model, only tutors who are better qualified and with extensive experience and good track records are selected and appointed as online tutors or e-tutors. This e-tutor facilitates all learners in one course, thus, allows greater opportunity for knowledge sharing among learners in a particular course regardless of the learning centres they are attached to as well as benefit learners in remote areas as they can experience collaborative learning. Contrary to the previous practise, participation marks are now not provided for online discussion forum, thus, only those learners who are

genuinely interested will participate. As a result, discussions are more substantive, engaging, thought provoking and definitely of higher quality.

As for **web-based modules**, learners are encouraged to explore the available HTML web-based content that is more lively, interesting and engaging compared to the static print modules and it presents interactive features such as Self-Checks, Practice Exercises, Animated Diagrams, Audio, Hyperlinks and Tool Tips.

Another effort introduced by the University is the **e-schedules**. In OUM, several courses are already offered fully online. Learners are not required to attend face-to-face tutorials for these particular courses and as such, e-schedules are provided to support learners in this completely online environment. E-schedules present weekly course activities which suggest topics for discussions in the Online Forums, Reading Activities as well as Online Activities. Additionally, OUM has developed **i-lectures** for the purpose of assisting learners to better understand important and difficult topics of a particular subject. Each course has eight i-lecture videos, with the duration of 10 to 15 minutes for each video. With these i-lectures, learners can view the video anytime, anywhere and as many times they need. At present, OUM is actively developing i-lectures for all courses.

Online learning resources such as Math Resource Centre (MRC), Gateway for Learning English (e-Gate) and Open Education Resources (OER) are being created for learners to support as well as enrich them in their learning experiences. The MRC which was introduced by OUM in 2009, is a learning resource centre designed for learners who need help in Mathematics. This

centre offers learning resources for reviewing math topics and provides online tutoring services to learners. Supplemental Notes, Practice Problems, Interactive Tutorials and Links to useful math sites (such as *Math Expression*, *Purple Math* and *Math World Wolfram*) are several resources available in the MRC. The Gateway for Learning English which is also known as e-Gate is a website that provides learners with a quick link to various English resources found on the Internet. E-Gate was introduced in 2010 and the contents include topics such as Grammar, Reading, Listening, Speaking, Creative Writing, Soft Skills, and Networking.

As the concept of lifelong learning now becomes a reality, more people are searching for information particularly from the Internet. As such, Open Educational Resources or OER were introduced. OER, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development or OECD (2007) are “digitized materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research”. In OUM, the OER was introduced to offer variety of learning materials available to all distance learners as well as non-distance learners for free. Examples of OUM’s OER include Course Modules, Lectures, Activities, Quizzes, Slides and Additional Materials.

OUM has high number of assignment submission every semester, in average about 50,000 assignments that needed to be graded. Beginning from September 2010, OUM requires learners to submit their assignments online and these assignments are subjected to centralised grading. E-graders are appointed and trained by the Institute for Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA) at OUM. To ensure the reliability and consistency of grading, assessment criteria or

rubrics is introduced. With this system in place, learners are now able to obtain feedback on their assignments before their examinations to better prepare them for their final examinations.

Challenges

As an institution that provides open and distance learning (ODL) through online facilities detailed above, OUM has the advantage to provide learners with innovative implementations of flexible learning, which helps put in perspective a time in an adult learner's schedule to effectively learn, alongside other responsibilities and commitments. This freedom and flexibility in learning is directly associated to OUM's Open Entry policy, which makes possible for a large number in enrollments. The practice of open education also allows for learners to take time off in the midst of study to temporarily re-prioritize their activities, without expectations and judgments by the institution in the learners' choices to achieve successful completion of their course. With this allocation in place, naturally, the time given for learners to complete the degree is only just as flexible. To facilitate this flexibility, learners are provided state-of-the-art online support and facilitation by highly qualified staff. However, it is observed that providing freedom and flexibility to learners and prospective learners (for entry) comes greater responsibilities and constraining challenges.

Just like many open-type academic institutions, OUM places less importance to the prospective learner's previous academic qualifications, experience, and background to allow entry. This belief allows focus to be placed on the prospective learners' interest to learn, as well as to change their career path into whatever industry, field or area of study they choose. It is one of OUM's main priorities is for prospective learners to be given a chance to enhance and change

professionally as well as personally. However, it has been observed that the challenge to implement such an ideal is apparent in the rate of completion and attrition, and as mentioned above, academic performance.

Although highly qualified staff in the thousands are given teaching loads every semester to facilitate the large number of learners, the challenge is to provide effective learning and experience to learners who are extremely diverse in qualification and background. The academic staff are also placed with challenges that are largely different from the traditional approach they are used to. This is particularly clear in the practice of online tutoring and facilitation, where the teaching processes are continuous and are not bounded by a set of weekly schedules or class-time hours that are reflected by the credit hours one is usually assigned. In addition to online tutors and facilitators, e-tutor mentors are also appointed to train and monitor tutors' activities online.

With registered learners easily in the tens of thousands in any one semester, OUM provides each learner comprehensive modules and learning materials covering everything the learner needs to successfully complete the subjects they are registered for. According to Safiah et al. (2011), there must be support to guide the learners with their learning, provide help during their learning, and provide necessary feedback for learners to improve in their learning. With that, many more subject matter experts are recruited to author all the modules, followed by its moderation process, production, printing, and the distribution of these modules to learners. For further accessibility, the learning materials are also being made available and updated online via OUM's myVLE closed portal.

It is a constant challenge in itself to ascertain that these elements (mentioned above) are taken into consideration when developing resources and learning materials and when designing online learning activities to be included in the web-based modules (Safiah et al. 2011).

Conclusion: Next Steps

It is very fortunate that the contributions in the area of ODL are advancing in both theory and practice, and that ODL, increasingly, is considered by many to be the platform for future education. In fact, many of the concerns and challenges pronounced here have surfaced and have been deliberated in the ODL and academic community, along with findings providing for various contentions for resolutions. OUM's way forward is to address the challenges stated in the above paragraphs.

OUM's provisions to provide optimal learning are to be supported by an online infrastructure that is efficient, with reduced downtime and error free, at the same time, addressing the learners' constant need to access learning materials, share thoughts with other learners and tutors, assignment submission, and online assessments. The increase efficiency in these facilities would naturally inspire better communication between the learner and the tutor, hence bringing the teaching experience closer to optimal. With learners are of various backgrounds and experience, better communications would further result in improved academic performance, in turn improve learner retention and increased rate of completion. Lastly, a more efficient infrastructure would also allow for more efficient training and monitoring of online activities; and this too, would contribute to the quality of learning.

Other than addressing the challenges discussed above, other possible areas to be adopted by OUM may be in the vicinity of mobile learning. Additionally, the current infrastructure and myVLE system may be further supported by more interactive 3-dimensional learning environment.

All in all, OUM has thus far implemented continuous improvements to the current approaches and system, with the aim to ever increase the efficiencies of its teaching processes, while maintaining its quality of learning. With the support of current advancements in ODL enhancement, OUM will continue to strive to enhance the online learning experience to the highest standards.

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