

# Borderless Education: Breaking Down Barriers through E-Learning and Effective Networking

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**Abstract** *In recent years, there has been an impressive growth in borderless education primarily due to the following reasons: the growing imperative of higher education institutions to internationalise, the preponderance of ICT and the rapid growth in worldwide demand for education. This has led to very active discussions on this subject from both the perspective of the developed and developing nations, each trying to evaluate the benefits and costs of adopting such an education.*

*Based on the experience of Open University Malaysia (OUM), the first ODL university in Malaysia, I believe that developing countries do have the capability to harness ICT and other technologies for their human capital development to break down barriers that impede their socio-economic progress. An equally important endeavour towards this end is via developing effective networking particularly among countries in a similar stage of economic development.*

*In this paper, I will share on how OUM has effectively leveraged the e-learning component of its blended delivery mode. More specifically, the paper will discuss the e-learning practices at OUM, the challenges that we face and how we seek to overcome them. I will also share OUM's efforts in developing and fostering strategic networking with other similar organisations in the region, the outcomes of which have been rewarding to all parties concerned.*

*The paper concludes with a firm belief that through a well-coordinated effort in e-learning and effective networking, ODL and other higher education institutions in this region will be able to galvanise our resources to fulfil common goals in providing quality education to all.*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an impressive growth in borderless education primarily due to the following reasons: the growing imperative of higher education institutions to internationalise, the preponderance of ICT and the rapid growth in worldwide demand for education. This has led to very active discussions on this subject from both the perspective of the developed and developing nations, each trying to evaluate the benefits and costs of pursuing borderless education.

What is *borderless education*? The term 'borderless education' is used to describe educational provision that crosses conventional boundaries of time, space and geography (Cunningham et al., 1998). According to UNESCO/OECD Guidelines on Cross-Border Higher Education, "*Cross-border higher education includes higher education that takes place in situations where the teacher, student, programme, institution/provider or course materials cross national jurisdictional borders. Cross-border higher education may include higher education by public/private and not-for-profit/for-profit providers. It encompasses a wide range of modalities, in a continuum from face-to-face (taking various forms such as students travelling abroad and campuses abroad) to distance learning (using a range of technologies and including e-learning)*" (UNESCO/OECD, 2005).

Based on the definition by UNESCO/OECD above, borderless education encompasses a myriad of higher education institutional establishments ranging from corporate universities, overseas branch campuses, open and distance learning (ODL) institutions and virtual universities.

## **2. Growth in Borderless Education**

Borderless education is one of the offshoots of the globalisation process. It is thus helpful to trace the factors that had led to borderless education in the context of globalization. The World Bank (2002) lists four significant trends in globalization:

1. The increasing importance of knowledge as a driver of growth in the context of the global economy;
2. The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution;
3. The emergence of a worldwide labour market; and
4. Global socio-political transformations.

The drivers behind borderless education are strong and will continue to strengthen. They include (Bjarnason et al., 1999):

5. Technological developments;
6. Enhanced interest in lifelong learning in work;
7. Widening participation and encouraging access to post-secondary education;
8. Huge increases in the international demand for higher education; and
9. General introduction of market mechanisms into the public sector.

## **3. Barriers to Borderless Education**

Notwithstanding the tremendous growth in borderless education as mentioned above, there exist considerable barriers to it particularly for adult learners:

1. Working adults are very busy with *many commitments*. As a result, they may not have the time to attend too many face-to-face interaction sessions.

2. Democratisation of education can only be fully realized when we provide education to as many people as possible. Thus, we need a delivery mode that has the *ability to reach out to the masses*.

3. Modern adult learners require *personalised learning support and high degree of interaction*. Our education system must be able to provide adequate support to address this issue.

4. Another factor that contributes towards mass education is *affordability*. Presently, the conventional mode of education is generally not cost-effective because of huge physical infrastructure requirements.

5. Today's learners expect learning content to be rich in *multimedia* which the traditional mode of delivery is not able to offer.

6. For more effective learning, learners need to be able to *access to a wider range of references which are accessible at anytime and anywhere*. A conventional resource centre such a physical library cannot fully address this requirement.

As I had explained above, the conventional form of education, whereby students of a particular age group go to college or university full-time for a few years do have some obvious limitations in overcoming barriers to borderless education. On the other hand, I believe that e-learning using ICT and other appropriate technologies can help overcome these teaching and learning barriers. This is also important in countries which promote the democratisation of higher education, whereby the need to increase the supply of qualified and highly-skilled manpower has become an important policy initiative in economic development.

#### **4、 E-Learning and Borderless Education**

Since the beginning of the internet from the US military-related scientific research (Hart, Reed & Bar, 1992), higher education institutions have been a heavy user of information technologies and have long been one of the most 'wired-up' institutions of our community. A combination of 'push' factors from media networks, especially hardware and software companies and 'pull' factors from university staff at various levels who recognised the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) led to increased interest in the scope for convergent media technologies, such as the Internet and broadband cable and satellite broadcast. The developments brought about by technology allow for new possibilities. We are seeing trends in education toward distributed, collaborative models of learning. Agency is shifting from centre to periphery, from teacher to learner, from author to reader, from librarian to researcher, from curriculum to context (Ryder & Wilson, 1996).

Based on the experience at Open University Malaysia (OUM), the first open and distance learning (ODL) university in Malaysia, I believe that developing countries do have the capability to harness ICT as well other technologies for their human capital development to break down barriers that impede their socio-economic progress. In

that context, I would like to share with you the efforts made by OUM in leveraging on ICT and other technologies in delivering education in an ODL environment.

## **5、 Networking and Borderless Education**

There are many barriers that may prevent adult learners from embracing lifelong learning. Collaboration among educational institutions through strategic networking will help to overcome some these barriers. These collaborations may be in the following areas:

- Joint content development;
- Joint research;
- Joint conferences;
- Sharing of best practices;
- Exchange of learners;
- Exchange of staff; and
- Joint programmes.

## **6、 OUM and Borderless Education**

OUM was established in August 2000 as a response to the Malaysian Government's call for the democratisation of education. This catchphrase refers to making education affordable, accessible and available for everyone. To achieve this, a simple yet powerful motto was formulated which served as a source of inspiration and motivation for us – University for All. Using this motto as our primary driver, OUM seeks to provide Malaysians a lifelong opportunity to pursue higher studies. The emergence of OUM was akin to giving a second chance to people who had missed out on higher education earlier.

OUM started out as an experiment to set up an efficient ODL provider of higher education programmes in Malaysia. It is a unique model, established as a private university under a consortium owned by 11 Malaysian public universities. It utilises the expertise of both the academic leaders of these public and other universities and the captains of industry to help develop its academic programmes.

As an ODL institution with a mission to educate the masses, OUM learners benefit from three things at OUM—flexible entry requirements, a learner-friendly flexible academic system and a blended learning pedagogy.

The blended learning approach employed at OUM is a boon to our learners. Through this approach, lessons are delivered to our learners using various modes. We have print modules, an online learning management system (myLMS) and face-to-face tutorials. This approach allows flexibility in the learning process, thus proving to be a big help to those who cannot afford to attend classes full-time due to family and work commitments.

The modules are produced with the help of a pool of subject matter experts (SMEs) who provide the content. These modules are then complemented with face-to-face sessions or tutorials at 61 learning centres situated in major cities and towns of the country. More than 7,000 tutors nationwide, from both public and private universities, have been specially appointed to conduct these tutorials.

The third element in this approach is the use of an internally developed e-learning platform called myLMS. This is a comprehensive and flexible e-learning system that enables lecturers and learners to interact in a virtual classroom environment and at the same time allows the institution to monitor learning and teaching progress. Through myLMS, learners can participate in online discussions and forums with their tutors and peers.

I am pleased to inform that myLMS has won several awards, locally and internationally. Among them are, "Runner-up for the Asia Pacific IT Award" from the Asia Pacific ICT Association, Kuala Lumpur, in October 2006; and "E-learning Recognition" from Eszterhazy Karoly College of Hungary. The latest achievement was the "Award in Excellence in Education Management" from Technology Business Review, Kuala Lumpur, in October 2007. Several local public universities have also purchased and used our learning management system, myLMS.

When classes first began, the number of learners and programmes was small. There were only 753 learners in August 2001 enrolled in 4 programmes. As a result of sheer diligence, commitment as well as increasing community awareness of ODL, we have succeeded in drawing over 75,000 learners to study in 51 programmes in the current session with 11 more to be offered in the next academic year.

Currently, OUM has 10 state and 51 local learning centres situated in every part of the country. Thus far, we have developed more than 500 modules using the expertise of subject matter experts primarily from public universities. As of our Sixth Convocation at the end of August this year, we have graduated more than 13,000 learners from our diploma, bachelor and master programmes.

Our learners come from varied backgrounds. They are teachers, civil servants, homemakers, corporate sector employees, members of the armed forces, nurses, retirees and the disabled. As Malaysia is a multi-racial country, our learners are from various ethnic groups as well. We have also broken the age barrier, drawing those in their 20s up to those in their 60s and 70s.

One of the most significant e-learning achievements was our completion of the e-learning project in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where we provide consultancy services to its Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE, KSA) to establish a National E-Learning Centre (NeLC) which will become a national hub providing e-learning solutions for all the universities in the kingdom. MOHE, KSA has chosen OUM's internally developed myLMS as the learning platform for NeLC. The acceptance of myLMS locally and internationally will further strengthen OUM's position among the top ODL institutions in providing ICT solutions and e-learning.

Another of our ICT achievements, our digital library, currently holds 23 multi-discipline online databases, comprising e-books, e-journals, e-dissertations and e-

newspapers. The library has more than 52,000 e-books and 22,000 e-journals, making it one of the largest online resources in Malaysia. This impressive collection is easily accessible online from anywhere in the world.

For a relatively young institution, I would say we have come a long way. OUM's myLMS has not only benefited our staff and learners but those outside of the campus community as well. Besides making our mark on home ground, through OUM International which was recently launched by our Honorable Minister of Higher Education, we have also ventured overseas. Our Centre for Graduate Studies has international learners in Yemen, Indonesia, Singapore and Bahrain. They are enrolled in our MBA, MIT and PhD programmes. Early this year, OUM held its first international convocation for its graduates in Bahrain. Eighteen graduates received their MBA scrolls from Bahrain's Minister of Education. On the local front, we have a number of learners from 16 countries. Our undergraduate programmes have also expanded their wings to Maldives in May this year.

As mentioned above, e-learning is one of the mechanisms that can contribute to break down barriers in borderless education by providing greater access to education to the people. In fact, our experience at OUM has shown that e-learning can further enhance the quality of teaching and learning by providing learner-learner and learner-teacher interactivity, thereby enriching the entire learning environment. At OUM, the objectives of e-learning are:

- To enhance learner access to learning materials;
- To improve delivery efficiency by increasing the opportunities for collaborative learning and by making available course materials 24 hours a day and 7 days a week; and
- To improve learning effectiveness by encouraging learner interaction with tutors and course-mates to support and promote collaborative learning.

I am glad to inform that the implementation of e-learning has been very well received by our learners. This is evident by the tremendous increase in the use of our digital library and myLMS by our learners. The use of digital library has increased almost 10-fold from 61,659 hits in 2003 to almost 600,000 hits in 2007. Our learning portal, myLMS registered more than 40 million hits in the first half of 2008.

An Important-Satisfaction Survey conducted at the university has also indicated that the ratings in term of the importance and satisfaction for e-learning have improved significantly over the years. Our learners' readiness in e-learning is rather high; over 50% and in some cases 75% are competent in using the various ICT tools in their learning. Their positive perceptions on the use of ICT in learning has a mean value of 3.2 out of 4 which clearly indicates that they are appreciative of the advantages that ICT can bring to their learning. In this regard, I believe that e-learning, appropriately implemented, would be a boon to the learners in other institutions as well.

## **7、 Moving Forward**

To move forward, higher education institutions worldwide need to unite under one common purpose to collectively promote borderless education. We need to have mechanisms that allow for organized, systematic and regular sharing, networking and exchange of knowledge and skills. There is an urgent need to embark on long-term and sustainable cooperation. For the Asian countries, in particular, we need to emulate the efforts of the European Community in establishing sustainable collaborations among our Asian countries.

We need to give priority to collaborating with other open universities in order to share and learn from each other's experience. Our recent visits to Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) and Universitas Terbuka Indonesia (UTI) are such examples. We have agreed to embark on staff exchange, joint research, joint e-journals, joint conferences and workshops, joint programmes, joint development and sharing of learning materials (including learning objects) and sharing of best practices.

More importantly, we need to provide quality education (Q-Education), that is, to improve on quality assurance, content development, e-learning delivery system, learning materials, assessment mechanisms, and physical learning and teaching facilities. One of our objectives at OUM is to promote the use of English as a medium of teaching and learning. In this regard, we need to leverage on the use of English as a pivotal instrument to collaborate in the delivery of our programmes.

Finally, we need to make borderless education more acceptable and more importantly, more equitable to all. In this regard, for us to forge even further, there need to be a better utilisation of technology, sharing of open education resources (OER), joint development of programmes, continuous enhancement of quality and effective sharing of best practices. We need to ensure that we are able to sustain borderless education so that many more will reap the benefits from it. One area that needs to be improved upon is human capital development, particularly in developing countries.

## **8、 Conclusion**

In this paper, I have shared with you OUM's experience in maximizing the full potentials of borderless education. We have been successful in leveraging on ICT and other technologies in the form of e-learning to complement to our traditional face-to-face delivery mode. We have also enhanced our international networking with other regional and global open universities as well as our strategic presence in several countries. With all these efforts, I believe OUM has been able to break down the barriers to borderless education.

Finally, I strongly believe that while an institution can make a strong inroad into borderless education on its own, a collaborative effort involving the right partners through effective networking could do it better. In this regard, ODL and other higher education institutions in this region should jointly galvanise their resources to fulfil our common goals in enhancing access to quality education to all through e-learning.

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