



INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: THE OUM EXPERIENCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

A high income nation requires a highly skilled workforce with adequate competencies to trigger the innovation-led growth and promote productivity. As today's world of work includes mergers and acquisitions, rapid market fluctuations and other turbulences, the workforce needs to upgrade their basic educational base to be able to respond to the emerging needs of a high income nation. No longer an employee can have a lifetime employment in a single company. The workforce needs to polish their professional skills in addition to its current technical skills which can be developed through continuous education. Only then, they will have a holistic development of both professional and technical skills which enable them to help increase productivity. The changing demands of the markets put pressure on the workforce to learn new skills at an accelerating pace.

As Malaysia is moving towards realizing the vision of 2020 to become a fully developed nation, it becomes more crucial to have a first class workforce with these key characteristics – higher education qualifications, well-developed skills in technical and profesional fields and increased productivity. In other words, to achieve a first-class workforce status, the workforce needs a culture of lifelong learning that allows for updating their existing skills as the society and world of work evolve with time. For Malaysia, the massive transformation of higher education is a national agenda to ensure that Malaysia's higher education is of high quality.

Open University Malaysia, the premier open and distance learning institution in Malaysia, has always been sentimental in inculcating the lifelong learning culture in the society. The role of open and distance learning in propogating the lifelong learning culture has become more prevalent in the modern society as it offers an alternative pathway for the existing workforce to upgrade their educational background.

II. COMPETITIVENESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The world of work today is very turbulent. Individuals and enterprises need to respond to the rapid market changes so that they have the ability to seize new market opportunities and adapt fast to the volatile environment. They also need to remain competitive to maintain a high level of sustainability in the long run. Successful enterprises which are built based on strong competent workforce allow them to provide high quality products and services. This workforce needs to master professional and technical skills at a fast-track pace. Professional skills can be developed through lifelong

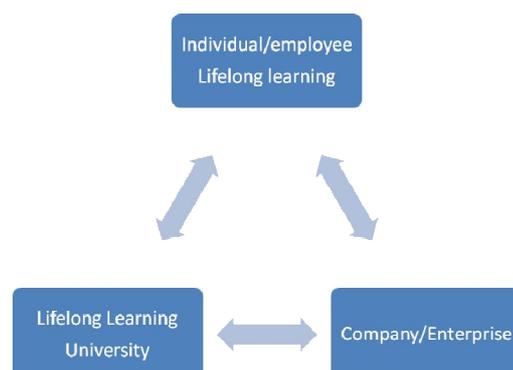
learning. Lifelong learning opens the window of opportunity to individuals who seek for open, accessible and flexible education without leaving their current workplace.

The current trend at the workplace encourages employees to pursue lifelong learning. Organizations that adopt this approach are seen as "today's job security" (Ottala, 1994). Since job security is becoming more questionable, employees seek public accreditation which is seen more attractive than company in-house training programmes with no official certificate of results of learning.

III. INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIP

As these organizations do not have the provision to provide continuous education, the educational institutions especially universities that offer lifelong learning platforms are able to provide the opportunity provided they have access to information about emerging skills needed to survive for the future. As such, more organizations are establishing partnerships with educational institutions to acquire the possibility of accreditation. Nonetheless, there is definitely a need for educational providers and industries to establish partnerships in order to develop competency in the long run and offer employees with lifelong learning (Ottala, 1993)

Since lifelong learning involves different kinds of learning, it is essential to integrate these elements in a framework. Open and distance learning institution like OUM plays a pivotal role in providing a lifelong learning framework which can be integrated into the organizations's human capital development strategy to further strengthen the organization's core competence. The industry partnership between an organization in the industry and a university championing lifelong learning is depicted in the Figure 1 below.



IV. OUM EXPERIENCE

OUM started in August 2001 with only 753 learners. Now more than a decade later, the university offers 52 programmes at various levels of study, with a cumulative intake over 120,000 and a total number of graduates that has surpassed 41,000. As Malaysia's premier open university, OUM has been able to stamp its mark in Malaysia and globally in a short span of time. Further growth and expansion lies not only within Malaysia, but there is much to gain from global partnerships as well. OUM has always been looking for possible industry partnerships as its main vision is to provide working adults lifelong learning opportunities via its open and distance learning mode.

4.1 E-Learning Language Programme with a leading bank in Malaysia

An example of an industry partnership is an e-learning programme customised for a leading bank in Malaysia. The need to develop an e-learning platform arised as the bank's corporate trainers and managers faced challenges in setting up and implementing a face-to-face or instructor-led English language training programme throughout the country to cover a large number of employees who need to improve their English language proficiency. They also had to deal with limitation of time and cost of the training programme.

OUM lent its expertise in open and distance learning by developing a self-managed learning (self-study) mode and the training modules were presented in CD-based and Web-based courseware. This approach was introduced as it was the most practical way to organize training for the large number of employees due to the geographical spread of its employees, time-learning and cost-effective factors.

To enrich the blended-learning approach, OUM developed a LMS through which learners could easily access information regarding the University, its programmes and services in an intelligent way. A system that is internally developed as myVLE, or "my Virtual Learning Environment", is an e-learning platform which enables faculty members, tutors and learners to interact in a virtual classroom environment. Learners could use myVLE to hold online discussions and to seek services and support to enrich their learning experience. So far OUM's myVLE has been emulated and adopted by other educational institutions as well, both locally and abroad.

A customised E-Learning English language programme titled English E-Learning Language Programme (EELP) was put on the e-learning platform to improve the bank employees' proficiency in the English language. The programme rests on a five-level scale, of which Level 1 refers to the lowest competence and Level 5 to the highest competence. The descriptors of the levels were based on the Workplace English Language Benchmark (WELB), which was aligned to the business English tests administered by several internationally-recognised examination bodies, thus offering employers and employees a reference for recruitment and staff development.

To place the staff in the appropriate levels, EELP incorporated an online Placement Test. The Placement Test was designed to group the bank employees according to appropriate starting levels in the programme. The course structure and content for each level were distinct in that participants were exposed to a variety of language competencies and skills. Upon completing each module, a Mastery Test was administered to assess the students'/employees' understanding and comprehension at their respective levels. As a whole, the EELP helped employees to have a sufficiently clear understanding of employer's expectation of their English standard and to work out a self-improvement target for career development.

4.2 Nestlé-OUM Executive Diploma in Manufacturing Management

A special example of a partnership developed between OUM and industry is the Nestlé-OUM Executive Diploma in Manufacturing Management (EDMM) programme, which was launched in June 2006. The first batch of 49 First Line Managers (FLMs) graduated in May 2008 while the second batch of 31 FLMs graduated in June 2009.

Following the success of this programme, Nestlé-OUM introduced the internet-based ODL mode of delivery from its 2009 intake onwards, where the EDMM programme was conducted in a blended ODL mode. OUM used a self-managed approach via various print and online resources where students could still undergo the EDMM programme while still remaining at work; online support via forums, chat, mobile, e-mail and et cetera with subject-matter experts (SMEs) and peers; as well as face-to-face classroom for tutorials and delivery of topics that require SME/tutor-learner interaction and/or participation (e.g. sensory evaluation and other skills training). Interaction with shop floor/site SMEs and facilitators (e.g. during projects and coaching) was also included.

The e-learning approach was used extensively in these approaches. A common theme is the role of e-learning in supporting self-directed learning that encourages learners to cultivate the culture of lifelong learning in their daily lives.

4.3 Human Capital Development Project for Northern Corridor Implementation Agency (NCIA)

The Northern Corridor Implementation Agency is an agency set up by the Government of Malaysia to spearhead a human capital development project in the four northern states of Malaysia, i.e. Kedah, Penang, Perak and Perlis. OUM was awarded a contract to manage and deliver manpower requirements for the tourism and hospitality sector in the fourth quarter of 2010.

The long-term objective of this programme is to encourage lifelong learning and to deliver community tourism development and its human capital supply. The programme focuses in the following areas of professional and certification:

- Hospitality Management;
- Travel and Tourism;



- Culinary Art;
- Events Management; and
- Retail Management.

All of these different focus areas lead to corresponding Professional Diploma qualifications with an international perspective. Some 500 participants from diverse backgrounds such as tourist guides, hotel and resort management and staff were trained for 11 months and job placement for the graduates was also duly executed. A convocation ceremony for these graduates was held in mid-February 2011.

4.4 OUM-PERHEBAT: Educating Malaysia's Armed Forces

This collaboration formalised a partnership between OUM and Perbadanan Hal Ehwal Bekas Angkatan Tentera (PERHEBAT), an organisation that manages various training and education needs for former members of the country's army, naval and air forces to ensure that they receive sufficient assistance for their own socio-economic well-being as Malaysian citizens. This partnership focuses on providing these individuals with the relevant academic and semi-technical qualifications that can help them keep abreast with current technologies, be academically proficient and attain the right knowledge and work skills that will be essential when they are eventually discharged from duty. These qualifications are also meant to help them develop entrepreneurship skills that will be vital for their continued growth outside their service in the armed forces.

In general, this partnership caters to all levels of study, from diploma to postgraduate, and also includes short courses and executive diplomas. Some of the immediate forthcoming plans under this partnership include promotion exercises at 157 schools for the armed forces nationwide and the offering of at least two short courses each month. The first batch should see at least 60 learners enrolling in the Diploma in Information and Technology, 80 in the Diploma of Management and another 70 in the Professional Diploma in Safety and Security programmes, respectively. Within the next several years, OUM expects to have an annual enrolment of 3,000 PERHEBAT members (those who are about to leave the service) and 2,000 in-service personnel as well.

OUM also provides advisory services for PERHEBAT to establish a university college of its own in the near future. For this partnership, OUM has proposed several options of study programmes or study modules to suit PERHEBAT's human capital development targets.

4.5 Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia

Borne of a partnership with the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR), this unique programme was designed as a training scheme for unemployed graduates from various backgrounds. The increasing unemployment rate amongst graduates in Malaysia has been a worrying trend for some time and this particular project is one such contribution by OUM to help alleviate the problem at the national level.

Learners underwent 10 months of training before receiving certification in legal practice and given job placements as legal assistants in legal firms throughout

Malaysia. In total, 170 learners successfully completed this programme in 2010.

4.5 Ministry of Higher Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Through its unique partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), OUM has helped to establish KSA's National e-Learning Centre (NeLC) in Riyadh. NeLC was successfully launched in 2006. With technical support provided by its sister company, METEOR Technology and Consultancy Sdn Bhd, OUM has provided NeLC with the technological know-how to embark on the Kingdom's very own e-learning initiative through the training of faculty members and IT staff as well as the development of courses utilising e-content. NeLC uses OUM's learning management system (now known as myVLE) as its e-learning portal. myVLE acts as their main reference point for all teaching and learning activities, as well as enabling them to interact with peers, tutors and their respective institutions. OUM's extensive experience in open and distance learning has guided the Ministry to develop modules containing classroom lectures, video programmes and multi-media programmes.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Industry partnership is a win-win situation for both enterprises and universities. Based on the industry partnership, the university would have a clear perspective of the human capital development of the enterprise, develop its networking base to sustain its existence in the long run, analyse the training and development needs to assist enterprises and organizations so that they are better at adopting the culture of lifelong learning and work together with industry better so that they can develop courses which are very much relevant to the changing demands of the business environment.

The OUM experience is invaluable in showcasing how industry partnerships help the university to create its own competitive position as a provider of lifelong learning programmes not only in Malaysia but in the Asia region. Its linkage with prominent government bodies in the country helps to strengthen its expertise as the leading lifelong learning provider with over 100,000 students locally and globally.

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