

# 'University for All'

## Open University Malaysia – a decade of growth

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Open University Malaysia (OUM) was established on 10 August 2000 as Malaysia's seventh private university and was the first to operate via open and distance learning (ODL). It is owned by a consortium of the country's 11 public universities. Built on the philosophy that education should be democratised, OUM has focused on creating an affordable and accessible pathway to higher education, while placing importance on flexible entry requirements, a learner-friendly academic system, and a blended pedagogy that combines different modes of learning. Each of these components is designed to fulfil the diverse needs of its learners and is backed by a state-of-the-art information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure.

Passing the one-decade mark gives OUM the opportunity to reflect upon its growth. Looking back, the university has certainly come a long way. At just over ten years old, OUM is still relatively young, especially when compared to other open universities, such as Open University United Kingdom (established 1969), Allama Iqbal Open University (established 1974) and Indira Gandhi National Open University (established 1985). Having said that, OUM is proud of its progress and anticipates more milestones in the future.

The pinnacle of its achievements is having created access for thousands of people to obtain higher education – most of whom would not have had the same opportunity had ODL not emerged in Malaysia. This is testimony to OUM's motto of 'University for All' and the feasibility of ODL as an approach that can indeed make education more democratised.

For working adults, who make up the majority of OUM's learners, the motives for pursuing higher or continued education are usually associated with personal development and career advancement. Moreover, in today's globalised economy, the knowledge capital of a country's labour force is considered vital for national growth. Without continuous betterment of the people's education, a country will certainly find it difficult to compete on the global stage. Thus, providing the means for these working adults to partake in education has great implications for both lifelong learning and national economic development.

The concern for educational progress to reap economic rewards is particularly distinct in emerging and developing countries, including Malaysia. Already, Malaysia is home to more than 28.5 million people, where about 19.5 million (or almost 70 per cent) fall within the working age range of 15–64 years (Economic Planning Unit (EPU), 2011). Current economic indicators show that Malaysia is faring well – with a forecasted 5 to 6 per cent growth in real gross domestic product in 2011 (EPU, *ibid.*), Malaysia can be said to have one of the most positive economic environments within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

With only nine years left to Vision 2020 (the country's mission to achieving the status of a fully developed nation by 2020), the push towards greater progress is becoming more aggressive. The country's New Economic Model (National Economic Advisory Council, 2010) stipulates that gaining this fully developed status requires Malaysia to achieve three goals – a high-income economy, inclusiveness and sustainability. This means that improving access to higher education and further strengthening the country's knowledge capital have become even more critical issues.

### Why OUM has been such a success

How has OUM contributed to this drive? Here, the objective of OUM's foundation to answer the Malaysian Government's call for the democratisation of education warrants reiteration. This is the basis of its motto 'University for All'; through this the ODL mode has benefited thousands of learners both within and outside Malaysia. To date, OUM has enrolled over 100,000 learners, with more than 36,000 having successfully graduated. This, in itself, is an achievement in lifelong learning. By focusing heavily on ICT, OUM has opened the door to higher education, giving working adults the chance to continue learning and to upgrade their skills and knowledge, thus improving not only themselves, but also their families, professions and, ultimately, their country.

OUM's support to the nation's lifelong learning cause is driven by various initiatives that tackle different components of ODL delivery; from ICT-based innovations to teaching and learning materials, as well as carefully selected partnerships with local and international agencies. These initiatives are a response to issues of access and flexibility, factors that can encourage more people to participate in lifelong learning. Importantly, the motto 'University for All' is an essential part of OUM's approach, as it resonates with the entire philosophy of a democratised, accessible, affordable and flexible education. Prior to OUM's establishment, there was no fully fledged ODL institution to provide Malaysians with a lifelong opportunity to pursue higher studies. Instead, entrance to universities remained generally confined to young people in the 19–23 age group. Thus, the establishment of OUM was akin to giving a second chance to people who may have missed out on higher education earlier in their lives.

### Democratising learning

For lifelong learning to be truly democratised (and to truly realise a 'University for All'), educational opportunities must reach every individual, regardless of age, creed, gender or socio-economic status. ODL learners are not fresh university entrants; most are working adults who study on a part-time basis as they juggle multiple professional and family commitments while working



*OUM is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

towards their degrees. They generally have more diverse backgrounds as well – OUM has welcomed into its community physically disadvantaged individuals, senior citizens, teachers, members of the armed forces and even prison inmates. This diversity represents not only the melting pot at OUM, but the increasing awareness of lifelong learning across different sections of Malaysian society.

### Partnerships

Apart from having enrolled more than 100,000 learners, the university's experience as Malaysia's first ODL institution has allowed it to explore various partnerships to encourage lifelong learning. One of the most important has been the university's involvement in the Ministry of Education's teacher upgrading programme (otherwise known as *Program Pensiswazahan Guru*). Since 2002, more than 40,000 in-service teachers have enrolled in various Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Teaching programmes, out of which about 23,000 have successfully graduated. OUM considers this collaboration to be a particularly significant contribution towards developing the capacity of teachers, as well as encouraging them to engage in lifelong learning.

Similar arrangements have been made for learners from more unconventional backgrounds, such as members of the armed forces, prison inmates, bank employees and retail managers. For instance, OUM has just signed an agreement with *Perbadanan Hal Ehwal Bekas Angkatan Tentera* (PERHEBAT), an organisation that manages various training and education needs for former members of the country's armed forces. The arrangement for prison inmates

is also a unique example. This is a groundbreaking initiative where OUM offers academic programmes at a prison facility located just outside Kuala Lumpur, through a specifically tailored delivery system suited to the learners' circumstances as well as the strict standards of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency.

The most recent initiative related to lifelong learning is the formulation of the Blueprint on the Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011–2020). The blueprint lists 20 initiatives that Malaysia needs to work on for lifelong learning to be holistically realised in the country. The OUM team worked with the Ministry of Higher Education and played a major role in the formulation of this blueprint. It will hopefully pave the way for a more concrete agenda for lifelong learning in Malaysia in this final sprint towards Vision 2020.

### Flexible entry

Another initiative that has direct impact to lifelong learning is the Open Entry System (now known as Flexible Entry System). OUM was the first institution to explore flexible entry and recognition of prior learning in Malaysia. This system awards entry to individuals who wish to pursue tertiary education even if they lack complete basic education. This is done by assessing their prior learning acquired through formal and informal training, as well as work experiences that can compensate for the lack of actual paper qualifications. The system has been in effect since May 2006 and OUM has enrolled about 5,000 flexible entry learners thus far. The OUM model has been emulated by other universities that are also beginning to adopt the flexible entry system.

### Affordability

Another aspect to democratisation is affordability. OUM's corporate social responsibility (CSR) endeavour plays a part in this matter. OUM sees this as an opportunity to give back to society, while at the same time create greater awareness for lifelong learning. Its CSR concept revolves around several strategies, such as affordable tuition fees, easy payment schemes, loans, bursaries and scholarships. Senior citizens and the physically disadvantaged receive tuition fee discounts of up to 75 per cent; single mothers and those from the lower income group are eligible to enrol for free; while national athletes and trainers can also apply for reduced tuition fees.

### ICT-based teaching and learning initiatives

OUM's pedagogical model – combining online learning with self-managed learning and face-to-face tutorials – is complemented with teaching and learning approaches that are also aimed at widening the reach of higher education to the masses. Central among these is the development of learning materials in various formats. There is a print module for each course, with a total of 932 modules having been developed so far, and about two-thirds of these modules have been adapted into web-based HTML formats. To complement the modules, OUM also provides educational content through an internet radio station (called iRadio), mobile learning, video lectures (called iLectures) and several e-learning portals, such as the Math Resource Centre and e-GATE (electronic gateway to English resources). In 2009, OUM began contributing to the Open Educational Resources (OER) community to make some of its learning resources freely available online, and also started a YouTube channel where various instructive, informative and interactive videos are streamed for public viewing. Recently, OUM unveiled its official Facebook and Twitter pages as a platform for communication and connection within the OUM community.

Clearly, ICT has a dominant hand in all of these initiatives. This is perhaps unsurprising as OUM invests much effort towards using technologies to complement teaching and learning as well as to support administrative processes. ICT is integral to achieving the openness indicated in any ODL approach. For OUM, staying true to the motto 'University for All' also owes much to ICT. Democratising education and encouraging lifelong learning are both an opportunity and a challenge, and using ICT to further the reach of ODL can indeed prove to be effective, inclusive and sustainable, particularly for a growing country like Malaysia.

## Conclusion

If Malaysia is to become a fully developed country with an acculturated lifelong learning society, the role of ODL and OUM is unlikely to become redundant. For OUM, a decade of growth is certainly something to be celebrated, although much remains to be accomplished in the future. Nevertheless, the ten-year point is a good time for Open University Malaysia to take stock of where it is, where it wants to be and how it plans to get there. The 'University for All' and its people look forward to a bright and exciting time ahead.

### References

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**Professor Emeritus Tan Sri Anuwar Ali** has more than 30 years' experience in higher education, beginning as a tutor at the University of Kebangsaan, Malaysia (UKM), where he rose to become Dean of Economics and later Vice-Chancellor. He is a former Director of Higher Education at the Ministry of Education (1995–1998) and Chairman of the Malaysian Examination Council (2001–2003).