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**KEY STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR SUSTAINABILITY
OF AN ODL INSTITUTION: THE CASE OF OPEN
UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA (OUM)**

Introduction

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the first ODL institution in Malaysia. Established in 2000 as a unique model, OUM is a private university owned indirectly by the earliest 11 public universities in Malaysia and started its operations with the support of these universities which provided the first management staff, faculty members, subject matter experts and tutors. With the initial synergy and academic networking, OUM thus leverages on the academic and physical resources of these public universities to develop and deliver its programmes.

Progress of OUM

The first intake was in August 2001, exactly a year after it was set up. In that debut intake, 753 students were enrolled in 4 academic programmes. Since then, the university has progressed beyond the early expectations of its pioneering leaders. As indicated in *Table 1*, OUM currently has an enrolment of almost 50,000 learners; a progression path that is symbolic of the current drive to provide windows of opportunity for working people to be engaged in upgrading their academic credentials.

In this regard, OUM is currently contributing towards the democratization of education, one of the nation's strategic thrusts in developing and enhancing its human capital. Currently, OUM offers 48 academic programmes in the field of education, science, mathematics, engineering, business, and information technology, ranging from the diploma to PhD level.

Table 1
Progress of Open University Malaysia (OUM)

Item	August 2001	September 2006
Enrolment	753	49,377
Number of programmes (Diploma, Bachelor, Master & PhD)	4	48
Number of modules (Printed, CD and Web-based)	29	200
Number of Learning Centers	12	60
Number of Tutors	100	5,000

The achievement of OUM thus far is attributable to a number of factors, the more important ones being the dedication and commitment of the academic and support staff, flexible mode of delivery, affordable fee structure, high quality learning materials, and well-chosen and adequately trained tutors.

OUM's mission statements clearly outline its role and commitment in enhancing human capital development in Malaysia. Its primary responsibility is to contribute towards the efforts of the Malaysian Government in democratising education. As at the end of 2005, Malaysia has 10 million workforce, out of which only 1.8 million have tertiary education. In addition, only 30% of its 18–23 year university-going cohort are in the universities. Malaysia aims to achieve a ratio of 40% of its university going cohort to be in universities by 2010. At the same time, 50% of its labour force should possess tertiary education. These targets imply that Malaysia has to provide a wide access to higher education to its citizens to enable them to improve themselves and contribute more to the country's socio-economic development. Given its mode of delivery that is readily accessible to anyone, any time and any place, OUM is in the best position to contribute towards the nation's higher educational development.

Blessed with strong leadership and very committed staff, OUM has been very successful in its quest to provide "second chance" education to the Malaysian public.

Key Strategic Initiatives for Sustainability

In the current fast changing globalised world, organisations must strategise for sustainability so as to ensure that they continue to be relevant and meet market demands. ODL institutions are no exception. Based on our experience, we believe that the following key strategic initiatives are necessary to ensure long-term sustainability.

a) Flexible Entry Requirements

The primary objective of an ODL institution is to provide education for all. To achieve this objective, entry requirements ought to be as flexible as possible. In this

regard, the Malaysian Government through the Ministry of Higher Education has agreed to allow for OUM to practice “open entry” similar to that practiced by other ODL institutions. With this flexibility, OUM hopes to enhance the opportunities for our working population to enroll themselves in the various academic programmes offered by us.

b) Accessibility

Flexibility is necessary but not sufficient to ensure sustainability of an ODL institution. Equally important is the issue of accessibility. In all our initiatives, accessibility is of prime consideration. In a nutshell, our delivery mode, learning materials, appropriate technology and learner support have been adopted with accessibility as the overriding criteria.

c) Support Services for Learners

Studies conducted at OUM indicate that our learners need a high level of support to assist them in their studies. Being working adults they have to balance between conflicting commitments such as work, family and study. As such, they expect the institution to understand and sympathise with their predicaments and consequently provide the necessary support services.

d) Relevant and Up-to-date Curriculum

One criterion that determines the success of an educational institution is the quality of the graduates it produces. To a large extent the quality of graduates is dependent upon the quality of the university curriculum. At OUM, our curricula are regularly reviewed by a panel of experts both from the academia as well as industry to ensure its relevancy. At the same time, the members of OUM Senate are drawn from the industry and professional services as well as other universities.

e) Affordability

Through effective management and prudent financial practices, the cost to deliver our programmes has been reduced to a level that is affordable to a majority of our population.

f) Engaging Learning Materials

One of the attractiveness of OUM is its engaging learning materials. We make a great effort to ensure that our modules and other learning resources are not only of high quality but also engaging for learners. This initiative allows us to not only attract a greater number of potential learners but to retain a higher percentage of our existing learners.

g) Multimode Delivery System using Appropriate Technology

At OUM, we adopt the blended pedagogy comprising of self-managed learning, face-to-face interaction and online learning. To ensure the full benefit from this blended pedagogy, appropriate technologies have been deployed taking into consideration flexibility, accessibility, affordability and teaching and learning effectiveness.

h) Promoting Innovations

One of the shared values at OUM is innovativeness amongst our staff and in our delivery system. We believe that innovation is a very important factor to ensure that we continually move forward. An example of this effort is that we provide awards to our staff for their creative and innovative ideas. On the delivery system, OUM continually strives to upgrade our learning materials, ICT infrastructure, tutor management system and learners' support services.

i) Knowledge Management

We also believe in sharing of knowledge among our staff. To assist management in making strategic decisions, a web-based "Management Information and Reporting System" (MIRS) was developed. MIRS provides strategic information, among others, on intake and enrolment trends, learner and tutor profiles, and financial data.

j) Global Competitiveness

In a borderless world, an organisation needs to be globally competitive so as to ensure its long-term sustainability. In this regard, we established strategic alliances and international networking with prominent international organisations. In addition, we regularly benchmark our practices against the best standards in the world.

k) Human Capital Development

All the above initiatives will not materialise without the full commitment of our academic and support staff. In this regard, OUM pays close attention to the full array of human resource management from recruitment, training and compensation. In addition, OUM inculcates a dynamic work culture, positive shared values supplemented with a conducive working environment.

l) Leveraging on Our Shareholders

Finally, OUM is very fortunate to be owned by the eleven Malaysian public universities. This unique setup has enabled us to leverage on their resources, both physical and intellectual, for our continued growth and long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

The above initiatives have served us well and enabled us to achieve significant progress over the last 5 years. However, we will not rest on our laurels and will continue to review and improve these initiatives in meeting the global challenges.