Distance Education Scenario in ASEAN Countries. “Malaysian Experience”*

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Abstract

Quality assurance in distance learning is one of the important targets IDEAL in Malaysia dreams to achieve. Besides developing its own unique modus-operandi of flexi-learning this Institute evaluates its working system off and on, in order to assess what quality and quantity of education it gives to its distant learners and what are the intrinsic factors that affect this learning process both negatively as well as positively. Present paper is an attempt to give a brief overview of distance education in Asean countries with special reference to Institute for Distance Education and Learning (IDEAL), the distance educational outreach of University Putra Malaysia (UPM).

Keywords: - Distance Education, Open Learning Educational Policy

“Teaching and Learning at a distance is demanding. However, learning will be more meaningful and “deeper” for distant students, if the students and their instructor share responsibility for developing goals and objectives; actively interacting with class-members; promoting reflection on experience; relating new information to examples that make sense to learners; maintaing self-esteem and evaluating what is being learned. This is the challenge and opportunity provided by distance education.”(Barry Willis, 1993)

Within the context of rapid technological change and shifting market conditions, the global education system is challenged with providing increased educational opportunities without increased budgets. This challenge has been accepted overwhelmingly by the intellectuals in both developing and developed nations, and has been answered by developing external programmes-The distance education. The distance educational system has been gaining widespread popularity over the years. By widening access to higher education, the distance mode provides opportunity to all those who are unable to pursue their higher education through traditional system. It is argued that distance educational system has an upper hand to traditional education system for it allows an educationist to reach a wider student audience, meets the needs of students who are unable to attend the classes, links students from different social, cultural and experiential background, allows self paced learning,
provides innovative and flexible cost-effective education and provides learning material that are self-explanatory, user friendly and appropriate for target group.

Researches indicate that the instructional format has little effect on student achievement so long as delivery of technology is appropriate to the content being offered and all participants have access to it. Achievements on various tests administered by course instructors tend to be higher for distant learners as compared to traditional learners (Souder, 1993) and there was no difference in positive attitudes towards course material between distance and traditional learners (Maertin & Rainey, 1993). The organization and reflection needed to reach effectively at a distance often improves instructor’s traditional teaching. Distant students bring their basic characteristics to their learning experience which influences their success in course work as compared to traditional students. Being older students they are highly motivated and self disciplined. Distant students complete their courses of study without suffering loss of salary due to relocation.

Because of the reasons listed above and many other unlisted reasons, distance education has gained impetus and has witnessed phenomenal growth from nineteen sixties to nineteen nineties and currently more than seventy nine countries are offering this distance education, the beauty being that all the institutions have their own modus-operandi depending upon their socio-economic, political, environmental, and socio-psychological conditions of their country and countrymen.

Like any other country, Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has also taken up distance education programmes for development of their country and countrymen. This is possible when the citizens of any nation are educated and their standards of living are higher. These nations have made it as an explicit goal to provide education to all, for all age groups and at all approachable destinations through distance education. Some of these countries have made this as a part of their national agenda i.e. Malaysia.

Education for adults was included in seventh five-year plan by Malaysian Government with a view “to improve accessibility to education and to increase participation at all levels through expansion of physical facilities and distance learning programmes”. The second chance education as it is described by Titmus (1989) was introduced in the country so as to provide opportunities for advanced education and career enrichment for adults who missed these opportunities through initial education system or due to constraint of working schedule. Public Universities in Malaysia have spent a substantial sum of money to set up specialized centers of distance education and at present eleven educational institutions in Malaysia are offering the distance education programmes besides other private institutions and non-governmental organizations.

The availability of resources in private sector varies according to size and type of industry. The big corporate companies with large number of employees and which have special funding are able to provide better teaching facilities, whereas small and medium companies are not so well equipped. The NGOs not supported by government have very meager resources. All the providers of adult education in
Malaysia had qualified staff; Ninety nine percent companies involved their agencies for planning and conducting of programmes. Though 99 percent providers had computer facilities yet only 1/3rd had computer assisted learning programmes, he reported (Azizan, 2001). Though the conditions have improved since then. Many international institutions are investing with private industries to offer their distance education programmes hence the competition will allow only those organizations to survive who offer better quality and quantity of distance education. Therefore there is a need that the providers evaluate their education and learning system invariably in order to survive in the global market.

University Putra Malaysia offers distance education through one of its outlets, “IDEAL” the extended nomenclature being” Institute for Distance Education and Learning”. UPM in line with the Ministry of Education, call for Institution of Higher Learning to offer distance learning programme, started IDEAL formally on June 26th 1995 with a mission: -

“To create such a vision that all the aspirants get an opportunity for education in a democratic manner and succeed in higher education and life long learning”.

For effective functioning and in a bid to achieve its mission, IDEAL has been underlined with the following objectives: -

- To conduct and coordinate distance education and open learning activity of University Putra Malaysia.
- To provide an opportunity to the people of Malaysia especially those in service as well as people in public and private sector, to get education at higher level.
- To help Malaysian in human resource development which can serve as a pathway for National development.
- Using the expertise of UPM in various fields to its full for mental emancipation and development of citizens and country on the whole

The Organizational pattern of IDEAL consists of Vice-Chancellor as Ex-Officio Chairman. Committee members from Management and Advisory Board of IDEAL. Director distance education is the head of the institution followed by two deputy directors one from academic and students affairs and another from corporate and support services along with a contingent of supporting staff, that is involved in active functioning of IDEAL.

Implementation of Distance Education at IDEAL

Since its inception the IDEAL has run a successful and expanding distance learning programme currently offering Masters and Bachelors degree programmes to ten thousand and one hundred students (554 Masters and 9556 Bachelors students). The enrollment of students has increased considerably. While the institute had only 37 students in 1995 it has 10,000 and one hundred students at present. This is because IDEAL offers quality education to its distant learners. The ratio of male and female students at present of male to female is 51.01 percent and 48.99 percent respectively.
IDEAL assures its quality education by developing its own innovative techniques and methodologies that are adopted during whole process of distant learning. In order to ensure its productivity, IDEAL check and control system during the learning process ensures quality education to distant students. Production of learning material packages (modules) and cassettes on educational courses offered are designed in such a way that they depict the true classroom situation. The weakness if any is overcome by learner-facilitator interactions.

IDEAL has formulated its own evaluation and accreditation system. The criteria used to evaluate the performance of a distant student are unique in nature and ensure that all distant learners remain at par with the accepted standard of learning. The courses of the study are designed on the feedback of their utilization and economic gains. While formulating them all factors via; information technologies are taken into consideration so as to produce those distant learners who will meet the future challenges of unemployment by setting up self-employed ventures instead of becoming job wanderers.

IDEAL works on three important aspects, which try to ensure that sufficient coordination, is maintained for effective working. These three aspects are academic aspect, administrative aspect and management aspect. The academic aspect deals with providing guidance and counseling to the learner’s. The administrative aspect is the support and assistance the office at IDEAL provides to distant learners before and during the course of learning. It manages the whole system for conducive teaching – learning environment. To ensure that each student is equipped with sufficient knowledge at par with on-campus students IDEAL has adopted Faculty curriculum for all courses with a few exceptions. The administrative and managerial support provided by the contingent of approximately 80 staff members, 23 from academic and the rest from support services, are the functions that are critical to the satisfaction of teachers as well as learners. The reply letters and acknowledgment of assignments by the supporting staff gives satisfaction and confidence of feedback to distant learners.

For maintaining quality assurance in distance education, IDEAL plans its academic programme well in advance (almost a year or so) before its commencement. The head of the programme at IDEAL coordinates the programme with coordinator or organizer at faculty level. The programme head acts as a facilitator between the two. The coordinator/organizer offering the programme, may not necessarily be the lecturer who prepares the module or designs curriculum. The programme head and the coordinator ensure that the lecturer designs the course curriculum, prepares module hands it over to modular head. A lecturer is given 6 months to a year to prepare the module. Once he accepts the offer of preparing the module, he is invited to module development workshop where they are exposed to tips for module writing. One of the difficulty faced during this process is lack of sufficient coordination which some times delays the process and creates a state of unpreparedness possibly due to busy schedule of co-coordinators and programme heads with other assignments. Reducing the workload of all involved or employing more facilitators can overcome this problem.
The academic programme at IDEAL is an interdependent phenomenon and all the elements of teaching and learning are interconnected. IDEAL offers its educational programme in May and November session. Students are informed through various kinds of mass media about courses being offered, place, date and time of registration. The major intake of students is in May session than in November session. Usually all the students desirous of seeking admission are enrolled. The basic qualification for entry in distance education programme is governed by respective faculties offering courses. Although the policy of distance learning programme is to cater to the age group of 19-24 years but the actual demand seems to come from older adults. Thirty distant learners in the age group of 51 to 55 and above have registered so far.

Soon after the registration is over an orientation programme which is usually the first face to face interaction is arranged for the students. Proper venue is selected wherein all concerned are brought together and introduced. The difficulty faced at this juncture is that the distant students have the sense of insecurity regarding learning process like whether they will cope-up with the programme and be able to comprehend the subject: whether they will have access to the teacher and whether they will perform well. This all is overcome by guiding and counseling them about the structure of course programme, assignment format, learning and examination procedure etc. The session is videotaped and is sent to learning centers for display.

The students while being introduced are informed that teacher is only a facilitator; he will give his best but ultimately it depends upon the students how to use this expertise. While being introduced the students are informed that the supporting staff are the silent heroes of distance education. They are responsible for registration, material duplication, ordering facilities, timetable scheduling and processing grade reports. The students are also informed that they required to complete 12 to 16 credit hours in each semester amounting to the completion of 100 to 140 credit hours on the whole at the end of the degree course. The degree course lasts from 3 to 4 years depending upon the one opted for.

At present IDEAL offers its distance learning programme, through its 35 learning centers and has more than 300 tutors, approximately 150 lecturers including the galaxy of lecturers from faculties and the staff mentioned in organizational pattern. The tutors are normally the experienced distant learners who are equipped with techniques of distance learning.

The four main domains of distance learning programme at IDEAL are:-
1. The learning material (Usually a module, a study guidebook, multi media supplements such as audiotapes, videotapes, and some kind of computer software.
2. Tutoring (usually 6 times in a semester at the learning centers according to calendar of operations preferably at weekends)
3. Interaction (face to face contact at the time of orientation/registration which is twice in a semester with lecturer at learning centers. Interaction is also through e.mail, fax, phone etc)
4. Assessment (At the mid and end of each semester and through assignment)
Learning material, which is usually a module, is presented to students at the time of registration. The study guide is central to each module. Its pedagogic approach is interactive, thereby amounting to more than just a guide through literature. Each is designed to facilitate the students thinking through engaging the student and holding his or her interests. It also provides clarity of purpose through enabling a student to be aware of how the subject under discussion fits into the wider course structure and why it does so. It also builds confidence by informing the student in advance of what they will learn and provides a checklist to ensure that they have understood the ideas and concepts. The language of the module is usually Malay Language but some modules are prepared in English depending upon the requirement especially is Masters programmes.

The perceived strength of this approach to distance learning depend on:

- Interactive nature of material
- the critical and detailed feedback provided to the students with their lecturer marked assessment (LMA)

Pearce and Shrrock (2000) have also supplemented to the observation that the interactive nature and critical and detailed feedback in a face to face interaction between tutors and students are the real strengths of distance learning approach. Researchers also suggest that distant students bring basic characteristics to their learning experience which influence their success in course work (Schlosser and Anderson, 1994). Research further reveals that learners feel more motivated if they are in frequent contact with instructors (Coldeway, et al., 1980). Utilization of on-site facilitators who develop a personal rapport with students and who are familiar with course materials increases students satisfaction with courses.

In a face to face interaction between a student and the tutor at learning centers at planned time consistent with timetable, tutors give assignments conveyed by lecturers and get it signed by students so as to keep the track and record. They look for the problems faced by students in learning and try to provide the spot solution to them. In case the problems need special attention they are referred to lecturers who recommend the necessary solution. In next face to face meeting the solution is conveyed by the tutors to students. The tutors act as a link between lecturers and students. They are mere facilitators between students and lecturers. Their job is only to act as a channel of communication between the source (lecturer) and the receiver (distant learner) and is responsible for any kind of communication lag.

Interaction between the lecturers and the students is twice in a semester usually at the learning centers. This direct contact between teachers and students overcomes the sense of isolation, which distant students usually undergo. The interaction with the lecturer is called intensive face to face contact since it is only twice a semester.

IDEAL follows the evaluation system as used by UPM. The examination procedure encompasses conducting midterm and final examination of distant learners at learning centers. The examination papers are set by concerned
lecturers and passed on to the examination committee responsible for conducting examination at learning centers. The answer papers are handed back to lecturers for evaluation. The distribution of marks is 30% midterm, 30% assignment and 40% for finals. It is up to the lecturer how many assignments he will give to the students. Assignments given to students may not necessarily be the same as indicated in the module. Tutors who give the assignments fix the date for submission and collect them from students. Both the tutor and student are supposed to sign the assignment. One of the difficulties usually encountered at this junction is that some of the students submit their assignments directly to the lecturers with the result proper record is not maintained and the loss does not fetch any marks. This problem can be overcome if students are strictly advised not to submit any assignment directly and should always follow the proper channel.

Internally IDEAL evaluates its distance learning through various committees i.e. Module Evaluation Committee, Examination Committee, Head of the Programme Committee and Research and Development. For external evaluation, IDEAL is subjected to ISO 9000, which supports total quality management and administration. Out of 10,110 enrolled students, 96 students have graduated from Masters and 1174 from Bachelors degree programmes. Though much has been achieved yet a lot has to be done to make this programme at IDEAL “ideal” in totality.

**Futuristic Aims**

Distance education is now itself emerging as a subject. It is pertinent upon the educationists in ASEAN Countries that they establish it as a separate field of study for research as is being done in other developed countries via, Europe and United States. The research needs to be done on every aspect of planning, designing, development, evaluation and revision. Research also needs to be done on the effectiveness and cost vs. benefit ratio of distance learning. Emphasis on on-line programmes is the need of an hour so as to attract international distant learners.

The mushrooming of distance learning institutes at Malaysia has invited the attention of educationists and policy makers. Moreover, the setting-up of distance learning programmes by U.K. and U.S. based educational institutions in private sector is a big challenge for public institutions in ASEAN Countries. If these institutions will not join hands to integrate their resources but start competing among themselves the resultant diversification of resources can pose a major threat to distance learning industry in ASEAN Countries. So the biggest challenge for the providers of distant educationists is to rethink, join hand for integration of resources and develop innovative techniques so as to excel foreign investors of education in providing quality and cost-effective education.

Malaysia has innovated a move in this direction by identifying METEOR Distance Learning Sdn. Bhd. (a multimedia technology operating company) to
work on the pattern of open learning university as a prime avenue for imparting education through distance mode under one management. The whole concept is not to privatize distance learning but to integrate all the public institutions of distance learning so as to meet the challenges and solve the problems and integrate the efforts of management bodies of distance learning institutions working independently. Though this concentration of distance learning institutions will not affect the independent functioning of these Institutions but the cohesion will try to bridge the gaps or loopholes and improve the quality of distance education by remaining under the control of one management. In future the plan is to merge all distance learning Institutions in one university, which has officially already come into existence on 10th August 2000 and has been named as “UNITEM (Open University of Malaysia)”. Effective functioning of UNITEM is a biggest challenge of distance education in Malaysia among ASEAN countries. To keep pace with other distance education offering countries it is imperative upon the distance education providers of ASEAN Nations that they maintain the check and control of their distance learning programmes and lay emphasis on more innovative virtual programmes.

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