A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF E-LEARNING PRACTICES
AT MALAYSIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the development of the e-learning strategies that have been introduced into Malaysian private universities. Using three case studies of Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR), Multimedia University (MMU) and the Open University of Malaysia (OUM), this paper examines how Malaysian private universities have introduced e-learning strategies into their undergraduate programs. It also analyses the policies that UNITAR, MMU and OUM developed to promote IT teaching and learning strategies. A critical view of the problems that these universities face in implementing their vision statements is presented. The conclusion comments on the mixed experience of e-learning at these private learning institutions: UNITAR, MMU and OUM.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the e-learning approaches that have been implemented in Malaysian private universities. 1996 saw the introduction of no fewer than five new Acts of Parliament designed to either amend old educational laws or introduce new ones. It is this latter set of initiatives that constitute the most significant attempt to address the needs of tertiary education in Malaysia. The question, therefore, is what did these legislative changes seek to accomplish? The critical piece of new legislation was Act 555, the Private Higher Education Institutions Act of 1996. This Act responded directly to pressure in the Malaysian economy for more locally trained, skilled labour by facilitating the establishment of private colleges and universities. The need for knowledge workers was seen by Malaysian universities as a signal to move towards creating graduates with a good grounding in Information technology (IT). In particular, the mission statements of the private and public universities began to include objectives designed to promote e-learning methodologies and multimedia skills. A detailed analysis of the actual process by which e-learning has been introduced in private universities is important because this sector depends on e-learning much more than their public counterpart and because they are compelled by their charter to provide distance education and multimedia teaching options.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptually, Bates (2001) describes e-learning as a continuum that is based on the locational aspects of learning as illustrated in Figure 1. At one end is 'no online learning,' in the case of face-to-face classroom teaching, and, at the other end, 'fully online learning,' in the case of distance education. In between these opposites, Bates considered a range of mixed learning approaches that are useful in understanding what e-learning has to offer.

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[1] Paper presented at the 1st International Malaysian Educational Technology Convention, 2 – 5th November 2007, Sofitel Palm Resort, Senai, Johor Bahru, Malaysia
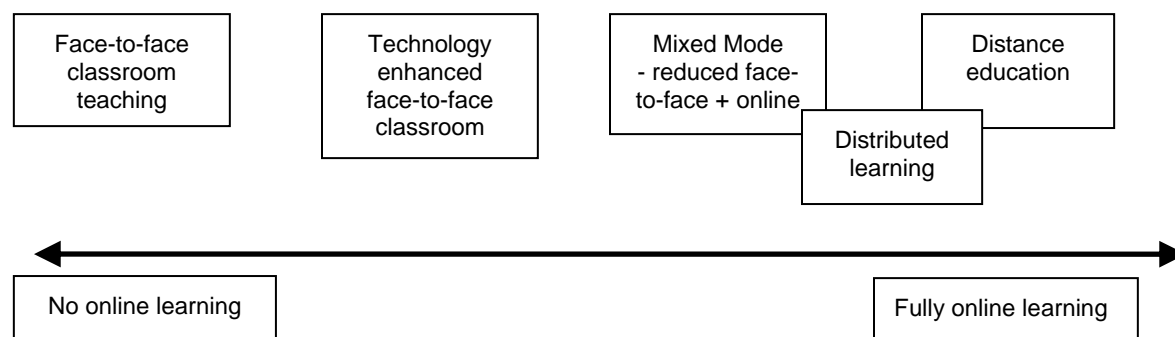
Figure 1: E-Learning Continuum

In Bates's continuum, the second mode of e-learning is "technology enhanced" classroom teaching or in Harasim's terminology, the "adjunct mode" (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1995: 78). In this situation, the teacher meets the students in a classroom but uses electronic means to present some or the entire course. Harasim et al. (1995) observed that e-learning is a valuable addition to the teaching and learning environment in the face-to-face classroom situation. They also noted that e-learning provided a good start for instructors wishing to explore the capacities of new technology in their teaching modes. Bates also describes the existence of a "mixed mode" application of e-learning in which there was a reduced degree of face-to-face teaching and an increased degree of online learning. Bates's definition is parallel to Harasim's, which emphasises that in the mixed-mode delivery, the electronic approach needed to be fully integrated into the curriculum and indeed had to constitute part of the course and course syllabus (Harasim et al., 1995; 80). The fourth and final element in the continuum was "distance education," which according to Bates was developed to provide a parallel option to on-campus teaching, in particular to accommodate those members of the community not able to move away from their home or jobs but who still wanted access to better education. In this case, teaching is located in the home or working environment and is made available through the distance mode.

Bates referred to an institution that provided such an option as "dual mode" which derived from the gradual transition of delivery teaching materials from print-based course guides and reading materials to a situation where, over time, access to courses was increasingly through the internet sites of teaching institutions. The latter included discussion forums, downloadable coursework, and online tutorials with teachers. In some cases, such dual mode institutions also provided limited face-to-face teaching opportunities, perhaps via an occasional tutorial system, which provided the student with some personal contact with the teacher. Bates (2001: 21) distinguished between these various kinds of dual mode institutions and what he refers to as a "single-mode" institution, which is characterized by a large student enrolment and an exclusively online education. Bates completed the e-learning continuum by introducing the "distributed learning mode" to explain the gap between mixed mode and distance education. He refers to *distributed learning* as the combination of a reduced face-to-face teaching situation and increased online learning (Bates, 2001: 22). This element also forms part of Australia's "flexible learning" modes which are sometimes classified as "technologically-mediated" learning and which offer a greater choice of learning delivery (Ziguras, 2001: 9).

The scheme outlined by Bates is valuable and useful, but his analysis was not complete. In particular, Bates failed to include a number of key concepts that are central to today's discussion of e-learning. For the purposes of this paper, a modified continuum based on Bates will be used. Figure 2 sets out this modified approach in which Bates's notion of "distance education" is replaced by "virtual learning." Today, *distance education* refers to providing students with printed materials via post. Some e-learning may also be involved but this is not critical to the old definition. As a result, the current literature prefers to talk about *virtual learning*, which describes the approach used by those universities that offer all of their courses in the e-learning format (PLS Ramboll Management, 2004: 5). This approach is widely applied in the context of private universities in Malaysia, particularly the universities analyzed in this study. The

second modification to Bates's scale is to remove the *distributed learning* option as a separate, intermediate category and recognize it as simply part of a *mixed mode* application. Below is the revised version of Bates' e-learning continuum that informs the analysis in this paper.
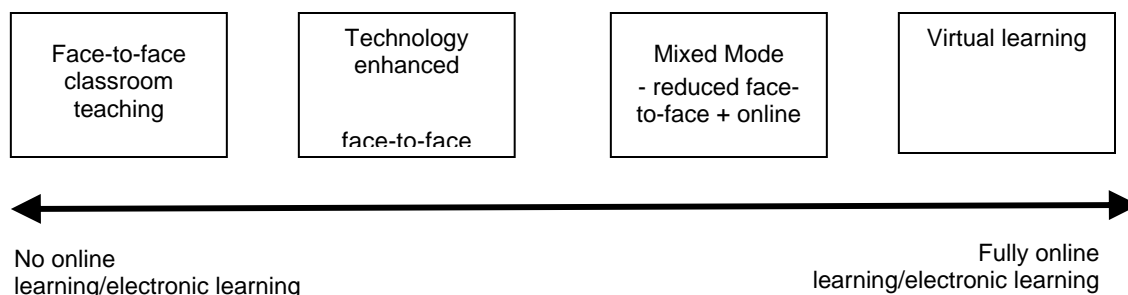
Face-to-face classroom teaching	Technology enhanced face-to-face	Mixed Mode - reduced face-to-face + online	Virtual learning

No online
learning/electronic learning

Fully online
learning/electronic learning

Figure 2: E-Learning Continuum Revised

Much has been said about the importance of e-learning in promoting the use of IT in university teaching and preparing students for the new technologies that they will face in the job market. However, we first need a clear definition of e-learning. According to some authors, *e-learning* or *electronic learning* is a concept that associates learning with the application of new technologies to the learning process, namely the internet, intranet, email, satellite broadcasts, audio/video tape, or Compact Disc Read-Only Memory (CD-ROM). It occurs in a range of learning situations: web-based learning, computer-based learning and virtual classrooms (Clark & Mayer, 2003: 11; Rosenberg, 2001: 28; Selwyn & Gorard, 2003; 170). This broad definition does not give a privileged place to web-based learning approaches.

What do the Malaysian universities understand by the term e-learning? In 2004 a Malaysian study on E-Learning Readiness commissioned by the Ministry of Energy, Water and Communications and the Open University of Malaysia provided the following definition: "the use of network and multimedia technologies to improve the quality of learning by enabling access to knowledge and remote resources for the development of a K-society" (MEWC & OUM Malaysia, 2004). This definition is generally accepted in Malaysia and stresses the connection because teaching and learning technologies and Malaysia's desire to emerge as a knowledge economy.

Nevertheless, we define e-learning as 'a platform or environment that offers interactive learning and teaching using electronic tools that can stand alone and can be networked.' E-learning evolves from distance learning as Supyan (2004) argues 'traditional distance education which offers correspondence courses in 60s and 70s has now faded away, and is being replaced by online distance learning and/or open and distance learning (ODL).' Historically, e-learning can be divided in two phases. During phase 1, in the correspondence mode of learning, audio cassettes, video tapes, and radio broadcast, in addition to books and notes, were popular electronic gadgets. However, with the advancement of technology and communication, distance education can now be conducted online via internet and satellite communications. It during this Phase 2, e-learning is associated with the use of computer and internet. Roziana (2006) observes that e-learning takes place in Malaysia in two forms: paperless and blended between paper-based and electronic based. However, she cautious e-learning practitioners that the emphasis in e-learning should not be on the 'e-' or the electronic gadget or technology but rather the 'l', that is the leaning. Supyan (2006) further supports that the use of internet technology such as online forum in e-learning should be based on sound pedagogical procedures and not technologically driven.

A RECENT STUDY

A case study was carried out to observe e-learning practices at three private universities in Malaysia, namely MMU, UNITAR, and OUM. This qualitative study uses the analysis of the case studies and 'stories' of the research participants to gain an insight into the current practices of e-learning in Malaysian universities. As recommended by Merriam (1998: 5) and Creswell (1998: 17), data was collected with as little interruption as possible to the normal circumstances in which Malaysian university staffs routinely work.

The following are the key features of a qualitative research undertaking:

1. Participants' perspectives and experiences are the key concern; and this is mediated through the researcher's own perceptions.

2. The researcher is the main device for data collection and analysis, as she has to seek elaborations and clarifications from the respondents.

3. It involves field research and detailed descriptive findings.

4. It generates an inductive research strategy that shapes hypothesis or theories rather than analysing existing theory.

Eisenhardt (1989: 540) has made recommendations about how a high quality cross-case comparison can be generated. She provided guidance on the careful selection of case studies and how information within the case studies can be collated in a manner that reveals where human experience converges and diverges. Considering these suggestions, it became obvious that the present study needed to include several private universities as case studies to capture the diversity of the Malaysian private tertiary sector.

ANALYSIS OF THE CASE STUDIES

The vision and mission statements that UNITAR, MMU and OUM display on their websites suggest that these universities have placed a great emphasis on e-learning. But how important are these statements? What can they tell us? Are they simply wish lists? According to Bates (2000: 45) mission statements are "not to be underestimated." Cunningham et al. (2000: 84) noted that new educational providers, including corporate and for-profit universities, were more likely to stress the importance of mission statements and strategic plans. On the contrary, traditional universities continue to rely on history and reputation to ensure their place in the educational market. However, even if this is true, it is worth noting that it is difficult to create objectives in a manner that accurately reflects the direction a university might take. Universities are not homogenous: they are complex and diverse environments. Vision statements require extensive consultation in order to reach a consensus about the direction a university desires to take. Once a vision statement has been created, it can help individuals throughout the organization understand what the university seeks to achieve and how. The mission statements of both UNITAR and MMU clearly map out a role for e-learning and the training of future IT and multimedia specialists as illustrated in Table 1.

The vision statements summarised in Table 1 are ambitious. UNITAR intends to become a 'premier university' using e-learning technologies, MMU announces that it wishes to be a 'world class university' for multimedia teaching and research, while OUM claims that it is the leading institution in open and distance learning. It is presumed that the mission statements in Table 1 are backed with financial resources and IT infrastructure. One common claim is that the bulk of the expenditure of private universities goes into technological infrastructure on the campuses (Castro and Navarro, 1999). The following section analyses the accuracy of this statement for UNITAR, MMU and OUM. Have these private universities made large investments in IT and does that investment help the universities to achieve the goals outlined in their vision statements?

Table 1: Private Universities' Mission and Vision Statements

University	Vision	Mission
Universiti Tun Abdul Razak	To be a premier university utilising e-learning in the advancement of knowledge and humanity.	1. Commitment to R&D. 2. Continuous innovation of effective ICT-enhanced learning. 3. Commitment towards effective teaching and facilitation of learning. 4. Commitment towards producing competent graduates with balanced personalities
Multimedia Universiti	To be a world-class university that leads in learning and research within the broad sphere of multimedia and IT.	1. To be an international centre of excellence for learning and research in multimedia and IT. 2. To be a prime innovator of ideas, solution provider and catalyst of change in the sphere of multimedia and IT.
Open University Malaysia	To be a leader and innovator in open learning.	1. To be the leading innovator in democratizing education. 2. To develop quality education through multimode learning technologies. 3. To develop and enhance learning experiences towards the development of a knowledge-based society.

Sources: http://www.unitar.edu.my and http://www.mmu.edu.my both accessed in October 2005
: http://www.oum.edu.my accessed in September 2007

At the start of its operations, UNITAR declared that it would adopt a virtual learning model. However, UNITAR could not achieve this objective. It very quickly revised its e-learning strategy to reflect a mixed approach that combined e-learning teaching modes with face-to-face classes. This was revealed by one of UNITAR respondents who was interviewed by Marlia (2006):

> *Initially, UNITAR started with a virtual university. Now, the approach has changed to hybrid learning. There is no more virtual university. Hybrid learning, in our terms, refers to the combination of three different approaches: resource-based learning, collaborative learning and computer-based training.*

(Participant V4)

During an internet discussion forum organized by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and UNESCO, UNITAR's first President, Dr. Alhabshi explained why being a virtual university had not worked. First, the IT infrastructure in Malaysia was incapable of adequately supporting a virtual university. Although Malaysia measures well in terms of IT connectivity (see Malaysia's performance in the Knowledge-Based Economy Development Index), some of the areas which UNITAR sought to reach did not have a reliable connection to the national communications grid. Second, the concepts of e-learning and virtual education were very new and virtually unknown to the intended audience. As a result, there was a low acceptance of virtual education as a method of teaching. Third, the emerging e-learning environment thrust its students into a totally new situation for which they had not been prepared by the rote learning methods of both high and primary school. Suddenly students had to be self-sufficient, intelligent and creative. This was often difficult for them, especially because UNITAR's students in the founding period tended to be average students. According to the available evidence, they were either school leavers or working adults who had failed to get a place in other universities or who had only limited

exposure to post-secondary education (IIEP, 2004). Consequently, they did not have a strong academic inclination for independent learning. Alhabshi and Hakim (2003) continue to claim that these types of students are still typical of those who currently attend private universities.

UNITAR's experience became well known among Malaysian educationalists. By the time MMU opened its Cyberjaya campus, it announced that teaching and learning modes would be mixed. Marlia's study (2006) at UNITAR recorded a interview response by Participant V3, a representative of the President of MMU, the university used a wide range of non-IT and IT strategies to realise its mission. Amongst the latter he named the Internet, interactive voice response systems, and SMS services.

> [Our definition of e-learning is] *using an array of technology tools to support teaching and learning over the Internet … With that, we tried to use some of the best IT services for teaching and learning of the students. Besides e-learning, we also have interactive voice response systems where students can … obtain their exam result through hand phones. Second, we are also using SMS services where staff and students can use SMS from the computer to the hand phone. For example, a lecturer is on medical leave and not feeling well. If he decides to cancel his class, he will SMS the students to inform them of the class cancellation. He can also ask questions to the students through SMS.*

> (Participant V3)

This suggests that IT strategies are used not only for e-learning purposes but also for the administration of courses and communication between teaching and administrative staff and students. UNITAR and MMU's commitment to e-learning in Malaysia were accompanied by the establishment of the consortium of eleven public universities known as METEOR by the government in 1998 to promote lifelong learning via distance education courses. METEOR later formed Open University Malaysia (OUM) as the seventh private university in the country. OUM is owned by the consortium.

To a great degree, the very purposes for which UNITAR, MMU and OUM were established suggest that e-learning was always going to play a major role. As the "premier supplier of distance education learning in Malaysia," UNITAR was bound to use hybrid-learning methods that combine resource-based learning, collaborative learning and computer-based training. Similarly, in the case of MMU, the very establishment of a second campus in Cyberjaya compelled MMU to place great importance on IT and multimedia learning and training. Here its collaborative relationship with leading international IT firms such as Microsoft and Fujitsu, for example, also ensured a high level of in-principle commitment to IT methods and e-learning approaches. OUM complemented these focus on IT training delivery system by using IT in various modes, such as distance learning and web-based system. By contrast, the more traditional public universities placed less emphasis on IT strategies largely because they were not strongly committed to distance education or to multimedia training programs.

THE E-LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN UNITAR, MMU AND OUM
As already suggested, mission statements can only provide a guide to what an institution intends or values. They also typically seek to differentiate their institutions from competing organisations in the educational market. As Marginson and Considine (2000: 184) claim, "universities are reluctant to openly define themselves as similar to other institutions," as this will lessen their claim to originality. Despite this, the vision statements of UNITAR, MMU and OUM (Table 1) stress the importance of delivering education through IT modes. These public statements are analysed carefully in the following section. Have the stated objectives been achieved? Have these universities made a genuine institutional commitment to moving the whole organisation in the direction intended? What has been the actual experience of these private universities?

E-Learning in UNITAR

The hybrid-learning approach, which UNITAR eventually adopted, uses the Virtual Online Instructional Support System (VIOSS), a software package designed to facilitate the learning process. VIOSS has a number of features, including courseware, forum discussions, announcements, course registration, frequently asked questions, examination results, billing, the submission of assignments, online tutorials and e-mail links to teaching and administrative staff. These operations augment face-to-face face interactions between staff and students for both teaching and administrative purposes. The result of this hybrid approach is that 60% of all teaching at UNITAR is now conducted in the online mode, with the remaining 40% face-to-face.

The following is a description of how the hybrid-learning approach actually works. UNITAR uses two types of tutorials. Synchronous tutorials include the face-to-face meeting and the Online Live Tutorial (OLT). Face-to-face tutorials are conducted at UNITAR regional centres, but OLTs are conducted virtually, at least four times per semester, at two hours per session. During the OLT meeting, students log into the system from their homes or workplace computers. Instructors can communicate with students via voice transmission or e-mail, and vice versa.

Another type of tutorial, the online forum, is conducted asynchronously, when a tutor posts a discussion topic in VOISS for up to two weeks. Students are expected to participate in the discussion thread, which is moderated and graded by the tutor. Web courseware is another pedagogical tool to facilitate and reinforce the learning process. Student performance is monitored through assignment submissions, and participation in forums, face-to-face and online meetings. he hybrid teaching and learning model emphasises the IT component in UNITAR's pedagogical delivery. But even with more than half of UNITAR's teaching conducted using OLT, this mode is still not adequately appreciated by lecturers and students as they prefer more face-to-face instruction than OLT.

Problems with the Implementation of UNITAR's Vision Statements

UNITAR insists that its hybrid teaching approaches will create modern, independent thinkers. According to its Vice President, "we will create graduates who are more independent. We want to produce graduates who are independent, resourceful and know IT. Here [at UNITAR], they experience IT" (Pardas, 2005). Despite this claim, it is doubtful whether this kind of self-sufficient learning is taking place. Marlia (2006) states that one UNITAR lecturer described how his students lacked confidence in coping with e-learning teaching and learning methods:

> *E-learning is a teaching and learning method which complements conventional ways of teaching and learning. If it stands by itself it's got its advantages. It opens up different opportunities for people. The only problem of e-learning here* [in UNITAR] *is changing the mindset from a spoon-feeding culture to an independent way of e-learning. I think that transition will take them* [the students] *quite a while. Students are used to being spoonfed all the time during school. When they enrol in UNITAR, they wait for us to tell them what to do, what to read, how to get these things. But eventually they will acquire those skills themselves.*

> (Participant L17)

This respondent was far from alone in expressing this opinion. This high level of student dependency will take time to be resolved, and will certainly delay UNITAR's "commitment towards effective teaching and facilitation of learning" (Table 1, Mission No. 3).

The UNITAR case indicates that the online learning approach might not have achieved its goal, and implies that the change from virtual to online learning may not have been a good idea after all. Perhaps, in UNITAR's case, it would have been better to have selected a more stable technology, rather than investing so heavily in virtual learning, which at the time was a largely untried technology. Furthermore, UNITAR was further hampered by a number of other factors. These included the level of technology adoption by students, the sophistication of the software and Malaysian society's overall view of the value

of technology. Perhaps all these things need to change before e-learning will be fully appreciated by both students and lecturers.

E-learning in MMU
The software package used in the delivery of e-learning at MMU is the Multimedia Learning System (MMLS). Since it was introduced in 1999 it has been revised many times, and the current model is Version 5. As with VIOSS, MMLS is a multifaceted system which facilitates the management of course content. It also provides communication tools (such as e-mail, chat and SMS), and facilitates asynchronous communication, online testing and grading, and enables students to be monitored.

Unlike UNITAR's distance education model, MMU offers three different kinds of educational delivery: an on-campus program, an e-learning on-campus program and a distance education program. Even so, most MMU students are involved in on-campus undergraduate and postgraduate programs in seven faculties on the Melaka and Cyberjaya campuses. In contrast to the on-campus program, the e-learning on-campus program (or the Internet-based degree program) offers education via satellite video conferencing. It is "a virtual university where students go online instead of specific lecture halls/classes" (Multimedia Universiti, 2005: 16). Only two courses are currently offered through this program: a Bachelor of E-Business (Hons) and a Diploma in Information Technology.

Finally, the distance education program, which is largely conducted off-campus, is mainly intended for part-time students. Here all courses are developed in a multimedia format, and students only experience two sessions of face-to-face meeting per semester. These two sessions account for 30% of the delivery of the whole program, with the remaining 70% dedicated to online forums and assignment postings.

MMLS conforms to the Shareable Courseware Object Reference Model (SCORM), which is an international standard.[2] MMLS is divided into two parts: its architecture (its engine) and its contents. The educational contents of MMLS are determined by the subject coordinator, using the course syllabus as a guideline. All lecturers teaching the same subject are invited to contribute ideas. Once consensus is achieved, the subject coordinator designs a storyboard[3] and sends it to the Centre for Multimedia Education and Development (CMEAD) for content design. According to Participant V3, 20% of the content must be multimedia and the learning objects must be interactive with voice-overs, animation, graphics, and so on. However, Participant L18 strongly believes that this practice is disruptive:

> *The people in the centre* [CMEAD] *do not have the educational background. For example, you want to put blue as the background, and the system does not allow blue. CMEAD tells us to use yellow, but from an educational point of view, yellow will not be suitable … Colours and sound* [matter]*. From CMEAD's point of view, they feel that the more sound you have the better, but it is actually distracting at some point. You have to know where to stop putting the sound or the animations. But … they do not have the educational background or learning theories.*

(Participant L18)

The MMLS architecture does not include any educational component. It comprises of an "Intelligent Agent"[4] which records and analyses a student's study pattern. In addition, it allows educational materials

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[2] The SCORM standard allows users who use the Learning Management System in any institution to access the same features in their e-learning platform.

[3] Storyboards are a series of images displayed in sequence for the purpose of pre-visualizing animated scenes. This helps find potential problems before they occur. Often storyboards include arrows or instructions that indicate movements.

[4] An "Intelligent Agent" is a software program that gathers information, assists people and acts on their behalf on some regular schedule. It is mostly studied in the discipline of Artificial Intelligence.

to be provided to the students, depending on their abilities. For example, a student may take up a quiz and receive the results immediately. It is also platform-independent and can be integrated with any type of database system (Kuan and Asirvatham, 2004: 53).

Despite lacking a learning element, MMLS has won various awards, including the Asia Pacific Information Technology and Telecommunications Awards (APMITTA) for Best of Smart Learning Applications, and the Asia Pacific Information and Communication Technology Awards (APICTA) for Best Learning Application (Multimedia Universiti, 2000: 44). However, these awards do not prove that MMLS is actually effective for learning, as the following section demonstrates.

Problems of Implementing MMU's Vision Statements

The MMLS architecture, for all its computational complexity, does not have any kind of educational element. Marlia (2006) reports that one respondent revealed the disadvantage of MMLS:

> *MMLS is system-oriented and in that sense, it neglects the students. It is a multimedia running system but there is no interaction between the content and the students. It is unidirectional. It only introduces different types of multimedia in facilitating understanding of a specific subject by using animation, graphics, etc.*

(Participant H15)

This highlights several weaknesses of the MMLS system. First, MMLS does not directly benefit the students. Second, there is only a vague connection between MMLS's multimedia content and students' comprehension. This was Participant L18's concern when she claimed that the multimedia and interactive contents in MMLS have interfered with real learning. Despite the advancement of MMLS, MMU management has to resolve many issues before it can safely claim that IT is fully utilised in its educational delivery. One of these issues is to design a comprehensive IT strategy to meet its vision. In this respect MMU is typical of private universities which overemphasise IT, even at the cost of underestimating education.

E-learning in OUM

Since its establishment in 2000, the number of students enrolled at OUM has grown from 753 in 2001 to almost 60,000 today.[5] The number keeps increasing as its powerful slogan says "Education for All' has attracted many in-service workers from all walks of life even though they may carry lower education certificates. About 90 per cent of the students are working adults, a majority of which are school teachers and military personnel. Recently, there is a large number of foreign students -- at last count OUM foreign students come from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen. Although considered the youngest among the three, OUM has received several awards for its e-learning program. In September 2006, it received an award from Technology Business Review under the category of 'Excellence in Education Management - Provision of Continuous Education.' In November 2006, OUM's printed modules have received the 'Excellence for Distance Education Materials - Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learning Award' from the Commonwealth of Learning, a facility in Vancouver, Canada. Concurrently, OUM received the 'E-Learning Recognition' from the Eszterházy Károly College, Hungary in November 2006. Another global achievement is the 'Best Paper Award' garnered by OUM at the Asian Association of Open Universities Conference held in China in October 2006.[6]

OUM adopts a blended approach in its program, whereby students meet their tutors three to five times per semester for a period of 150 minutes per meeting, and the remaining teaching-learning hours are

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[5] http://www.oum.edu.my/v2/eoumtoday/2007/july-issue37-2007/page3.php

[6] http://www.khaleejtimes.com/malaysia/mt_edu_cnt4.html

conducted online via e-mail, online discussion, and self-managed instruction. E-learning at OUM is managed by a homegrown web-based system called MyLMS (My Learning Management System). Like MMLS and VOISS, it consists of application packages for students, lecturers, tutors, and administrators. MyLMS is very user-friendly and quite comprehensive. It offers several facilities: myUniversity, myCourse, myCommunity, myProfile, myLibrary, myMail, Learner Connexxions, Tutor Connexxions, and OMES (Online Marks Entry System). Each facility consists of several necessary items that make MyLMS an excellent system. In fact, MyLMS platform has received MSC-Asia Pacific ICT Merit Award for 'Best in Education and Training' in December 2006. It also meets the standard prescribed by SCORM and IMS capable and can be deployed on a variety of platforms including open source platforms.

Problems of Implementing OUM's Vision Statements

OUM has moved very fast as an open and distance learning education provider in Malaysia. Despite its various achievement awards, unlike UNITAR and MMU, OUM still lacks online interactive learning materials including interactive tutorials in structured forms and interactive quizzes with immediate feedbacks in its MyLMS albeit its excellent tools. Its self-managed instruction is basically unidirectional as it does not provide interactive learning materials. In this regards, two separate studies indicate that a follow up enforcement on students' mastery of necessary ICT skills is needed (Supyan, 2004) to ensure students' utilization of the learning facilities at OUM, and an increase in scores for participation in online discussions and an improvement on online discussion procedures are required in OUM (Supyan, 2006). A trace study on former OUM students' participation in continuous life long learning activities such as in online forum for special interest groups would confirm whether these students have acculturated a new work culture in their professional development in the present knowledge based society.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's private universities have given the impression that they are committed to e-learning as a teaching method. Indeed the original purpose in setting up of UNITAR in particular was to provide online access to students via the distance education mode. MMU also had a powerful brief to develop e-learning and multimedia approaches to teaching and learning. OUM seems to move faster in its e-learning program within six years of its operation. Its uniqueness is not only seen in its dynamic continuous improvement in its MyLMS but also the wider spectrum of its students. To a considerable extent, UNITAR, MMU and OUM have indeed established course delivery and student-staff communications systems that meet these objectives. The commitment of these three private universities has ensured that e-learning technologies have become a permanent feature of the tertiary sector in Malaysia.

Yet as this paper has documented, serious problems remain, which continue to hinder the development of these teaching technologies, even at UNITAR, MMU and OUM. The analysis of the mission statements of these universities indicated that there are some conflicting opinions about the effectiveness of UNITAR's hybrid teaching and learning model, MMU's MMLS and OUM's myLMS platform. These questions suggest that the question of how best to deliver e-learning still remain unresolved. This conflict however may be temporary. As e-learning is new in Malaysia, the demand for it is tremendously increasing. Therefore, continuous improvements in the quality of e-learning offered at these universities should be taken seriously. Having ISO certificates or some world class standard recognitions would seem to add more credibility in these educational institutions. Still, private universities in Malaysia have gone far in e-learning compared to public universities which are now crawling to find their niches in e-learning. Perhaps, public universities could learn from private universities in running e-learning program and would avoid mistakes made in the past.

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