

MODULE: 6f) ODL Example: Wawasan Open University (WOU), Malaysia
CONTRIBUTOR
TO THIS SECTION: (Based on information provided by the University)
UPDATED ON : 31 May 2008
SPONSOR: Pan Asia Networking (PAN) Programme Initiative of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC: www.idrc.ca), under a 2005-08 grant to the Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP) for the project 'PANdora: Distance and Open Resource Access'

This section contains one of a series of open and distance learning (ODL) institutions in Asia. The range of ways in which ODL is provided by these institutions provides useful models for other organisations to consider.

EXAMPLE/F: Wawasan Open University (WOU), Malaysia

Despite the existence of another Open University in Malaysia since 2001, the founders of the Wawasan Open University (WOU) felt the need for another such university to further expand access to higher education in this multi-racial country of 27 million people. WOU is an independent Council-governed, private, not-for-profit tertiary institution dedicated to adult learners. It is a 'people's university' funded by the Wawasan Education Foundation, a charity, and provides tertiary education opportunities through the open and distance learning (ODL) mode. WOU was established in August 2006 and is currently in its third semester with approximately 1700 active learners. A further 800 are inactive. The University is planning to grow steadily and expects to reach its full potential as a first-choice provider of higher education for adults by the year 2015.

The WOU student population is a cross-section of Malaysia's multi-ethnic community, with the youngest student being 21 years old and the oldest 71 years old. As many men as women study at WOU. They include homemakers, clerks, technicians, teachers, office workers, and manual workers. Many have years of work experience behind them though left school before graduating. Others have had the benefit of post-secondary education already, and are returning to refresh and renew their knowledge and skills.

The University's planning, development and management have been guided for 2006-2015 by a Ten-Year Development Plan (2006-2015), and a Ten-Year Strategic Plan, prepared by its founding planners. Recently the University also published its first Five-Year Business Plan, a full statement of the University's business strategy which is expected to guide the University in a fiducially responsible way as it creates for itself a niche in the highly competitive Malaysian higher education marketplace. The Five-Year Plan was prepared for the following purposes:

- to establish a framework for senior management to use as they pursue the University's goals and objectives;
- to provide information to the Wawasan Education Foundation as well as the University Council, helping them to make informed decisions regarding the business aspects of the University;
- to sustain the interest of the Foundation and other potential philanthropies in WOU as a sound capital investment worthy of their financial support;

In short, the Plan serves as a blueprint of steps the University has to take in order to build its ODL business and at the same time list out the resources that are necessary to ensure success as a self supporting not-for-profit establishment. WOU's overall vision is to be a vibrant community that inspires life-long learning, supports innovation and nurtures all-round personal growth. The students, faculty and staff embrace and are encouraged to conduct themselves through a set of complementary values, based on the belief that every person has the potential to develop to the fullest. From the outset, the University has established, through extensive discussion with founding staff, council, community leaders, and donors, five strategic goals.

Goal 1: A *social goal* to provide access to values-based learning for all adult working Malaysians regardless of their prior academic achievements and present knowledge, age, socio-economic situation, gender and residential location.

Goal 2: An *academic goal* to deliver high-quality education at the preparatory, diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Goal 3: A *first institutional goal* to build a world-class environment for learning, administration and the pursuit of scholarship.

Goal 4: A *second institutional goal* to establish and strengthen institutional partnerships and community outreach.

Goal 5: A *management goal* to handle the institution's human, financial and physical resources effectively and efficiently

WOU's Academic Programmes

Undergraduate degree programmes form the core of WOU's academic activities, and provide most of the revenue needed to finance the University. As the University is committed to supporting working adults, the choice of academic disciplines is dictated by workplace needs. Malaysia is essentially a trading nation, dealing in natural and manufactured goods and increasingly in services. The bulk of the Malaysian population is employed in these sectors, and the University therefore focuses on academic programmes in these areas. Depending on the future development of the Malaysian Qualification Agency's [MQA] accreditation protocols, WOU also plans to deliver carefully selected postgraduate programmes, certificate and sub-degree diploma programmes. All of the academic programmes of the University will be designed, developed, delivered and assessed by the following Schools:

- Foundation and Liberal Studies,
- Business and Administration,
- Science and Technology, and
- Education, Languages and Communication

Programme development is guided by the conditions of approval prescribed by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher education, and by the recommendations of the panel of experts that conducted the University's original feasibility study in 2000. During their design phase, all programmes also benefit from the advice of a panel of industry, business and academic experts constituted for this purpose by the University senate. The programmes currently approved by the University's Council, provisionally accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Agency and approved by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education are:

Bachelor degrees, first offered in 2007:

1. Business in Accounting
2. Business in Banking and Finance
3. Business in Business Information Systems
4. Business in Logistics and Supply Chain Management
5. Business in Management
6. Business in Sales and Marketing
7. Technology in Electronics
8. Technology in Information and Communication Technology
9. Technology in Computer Systems and Network
10. Technology in Computing and Intelligent Systems
11. Technology in Electronic Commerce

Bachelor degrees, to be offered in 2009-2011:

12. Arts in Liberal Studies
13. Arts in Psychology
14. Education
15. Arts in Chinese Studies
16. Arts in English Studies
17. Science in Biomedical Technology and Informatics
18. Nursing (Conversion Programme)
19. Communications in Advertising
20. Communications in Multimedia

Diplomas, to be offered in 2009-2011:

21. Sales and Marketing
22. Management
23. Logistics and Supply Chain Management
24. Hospitality
25. Accounting
26. Financial Services
27. Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management
28. Business Information Systems
29. Information Technology
30. Multimedia Technology
31. Telecommunications Engineering
32. Electronic Engineering

Master's degrees, to be offered in 2008-11:

33. Commonwealth Executive Masters of Business Administration
34. Commonwealth Executive Masters of Public Administration
35. Business Administration in Logistics and Supply Chain Management
36. Business Administration in Financial Services
37. Business Administration in International Business Management
38. Technology in Financial Information Systems
39. Technology in Mobile Computing
40. Technology in Information Security
41. Education

Doctoral degree, to be offered in 2009:

42. PhD/ Master's by Research

The University's courses are designed to serve the needs of multiple programmes, as appropriate. The University expects to design and develop 135 individual self-learning course materials during the 2008-2011 period.

One of the challenges WOU will face as students in undergraduate degree programmes progress to higher levels is the financial viability of low student populations at these levels. The University may therefore have to adopt innovative ways to provide learning support; for example:

- other presentation schedules than once every three or four semesters;
- restricting tutorials and laboratory classes to a few regional locations only;
- increasing the use of online tutorials and reducing face-to-face (f2f) sessions; and
- using video-conferencing.

While the University's core business will be the provision of sub-, under- and post-graduate degree programmes, it is also conscious of the growing need to provide working adults with shorter continuing and professional development (CPD) programmes. Some of these may be distance-based, while many will be in an f2f environment using teachers from the University and the larger community. All CPD courses and programmes will be modularised to the extent allowed by the Malaysian Qualification Agency, providing multiple entry and exit points for learners.

A further strategic decision is the use of English as the main medium of instruction. English usage in education is a contentious issue in Malaysia for a variety of reasons, and the University has taken this bold decision a) recognising that for practical purposes Malaysians, especially working adults, must become competent users of the English language given the country's wish to be a global player in trade and diplomacy; and b) in order to access knowledge products available to open learners around the world, for local adoption and adaptation. This strategy will enable the university to make learning materials available to its students quickly and economically.

WOU's course development model is described in detail in the 'Instructional Design' module of the Guidebook.

Quality Assurance

For senior management, the challenge is to ensure that quality concerns are not mere platitudes but remain a constant requirement. Organising and operating a DE institution requires that quality assurance (QA) is not limited to academic elements only. The University needs to have QA systems in place in all aspects of its work, and in order to achieve this the WOU senate and management boards have developed and implemented protocols for the maintenance of quality reflecting international good practice. These are subjected to constant internal and external scrutiny. Internal QA is monitored by departmental committees, boards of academic schools, the University senate and management board, and ultimately the University's fifteen-member Council, composed of representatives of industry, business, government, academia and civil society. Individuals serving the Council are women and men of high standing in their constituencies. Council operates through a number of committees, and has the ultimate power of conferring academic awards on the recommendation of the University's senate.

External checks of the system are assured through:

- an external academic peer review group advising on curricular matters and the introduction of new programmes;
- an external course assessor system assessing the relevance, appropriateness, depth and treatment of courses;
- an external examiner system ensuring parity of standards; and
- a periodic external institutional review system monitoring the effectiveness and efficiency of the entire organisation.

Academic quality is reflected in the course materials, learning environment, assessment, and student support services, and is monitored most rigorously. WOU is mindful of the importance of designing and modifying the curriculum to be relevant to the adult learner. The self-instructional materials that it produces, and its learner support systems, receive regular internal and external advice and audit, ensuring that five areas of academic integrity and excellence are maintained:

- programme planning;
- course design, development and production;
- course delivery;
- student assessment and award; and
- staff development

In each of these areas, WOU's QA policies are guided by:

- the University's values and commitment to good practice;
- the Malaysian Quality Agency's criteria and guidelines, especially as they apply to tertiary education; and
- international good practices and benchmarks addressing ODL provisions.

The tenets of QA derived from the experience of, for example, the National Accreditation Board and international benchmarks, ensure that programme planning applies the following criteria.

1. All learning outcomes are set at an appropriate level and are clearly communicated to the students.
2. Content and design of the curriculum and the teaching methodologies are effective in enabling students to achieve their desired outcomes, in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and the development of practical skills and abilities.
3. Assessment of outcomes and achievement is appropriately designed and rigorously administered.
4. Acquired content knowledge and skills should be relevant, transferable, specific to the purpose, and blending traditional education with applied technology skills.
5. Completion of studies takes the form of credits and credentials recognised by professional accreditation bodies and employers and by other educational institutions, as being of the same value as those acquired in the f2f mode, and transferable within programmes and institutions locally, nationally and internationally.
6. The return on investment of time, finances and energy meets the expectations generated by the institution in relation to the benefits and utility of the programmes, the subjective achievement of personal goals, and customer satisfaction with all elements of the courses and programmes studied.

WOU has also implemented course development, delivery and assessment protocols inputs advised by a wide range of academic and community leaders:

- advisory peer groups for each course;
- external examiner systems ensuring that appropriate exit standards are met by the University's assessment and exam systems;
- participation of a broad range of specialists (e.g. instructional technologists, course designers, editors, and external content assessors) in the development of learning materials; and
- external programme appraisal of the entire system every 5 to 6 years to ensure that WOU's vigour and high standards are maintained.

Milestones and economic sustainability

Despite being less than two years old the WOU has passed some significant milestones, including the:

- construction of a purpose-built campus in Penang and five regional offices around the country to house all of the university's staff and facilities;
- establishment of three faculties and a Centre for Graduate Studies, and all of the administrative structures necessary and required by a dedicated ODL institution;
- successful launch of eleven undergraduate and two postgraduate degree programmes provisionally accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Agency;
- design and development of 37 individual courses and enrolment of 2500 learners in its first three semesters;
- delivery of an intensive Headstart Programme to prepare needy learners for university studies;
- searching, appointment and training of close to 250 tutors;
- establishment of links through active participation and bilateral ties with ODL institutions in the region and internationally;
- creation of a dynamic, locally-developed learning management system based on the Moodle™ platform;
- circulation (5,000 copies per issue) of WOU's quarterly newsletter, *WawasanLink*, for in-house and public reading; and
- Strategic marketing and publicity drive activities resulting in greater WOU-ODL brand visibility in the country.

With benefits of scale and measures such as the above, it is possible to build a self-sustaining and perpetuating institution, though the path towards this goal is full of challenges. The biggest challenge facing WOU will be its ability to ensure its future viability. The conception of WOU is born out of idealism and established through philanthropy. Its challenges include a competitive and hostile marketplace, an uncertain government policy environment on non-governmental funded higher education, the Malaysian economic and political situation, and the supply of good academic talent. The University's five-year rolling business plan is based on an understanding of all of these factors, on reaching specific revenue targets, and on managing potential risks.

In its first five years, the total cost of establishing WOU's physical and IT infrastructure, and its seven regional centres is expected to amount to approximately USD 20 million. In addition, the University's total direct and indirect costs are expected to reach USD 70 million. During the same period, the University is expected to generate a total revenue of about USD 43 million. The Foundation sponsoring the University has undertaken to pay for the difference between expenditure and revenue (i.e. approx. USD 27million). The University is confident that revenue

will match expenditure by the end of the first five-year plan period, though its planning projections indicate a deficit of approx. USD 3 million as the university enters its second quinquennium. This deficit is expected to be eliminated when the University returns to a surplus environment by the middle of the 2nd quinquennium. Table 1 presents the projected cash flow of the University during its first five years.

Table 2: Summary of WOU's cash flow for the period 2008-2012 (in Malaysian Ringgit)

	Year					Total (RM '000)
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Fee Revenue	7,230	14,789	24,909	37,889	48,299	133,116
Misc sources	30	40	60	50	50	230
Total cash inflow	7,260	14,829	24,969	37,939	48,349	133,346
Direct Costs	(2,923)	(4,182)	(6,854)	(10,321)	(13,048)	(37,328)
Indirect costs	(22,407)	(28,586)	(33,530)	(38,271)	(40,601)	(163,395)
Operating Expenses	(25,330)	(32,769)	(40,384)	(48,591)	(53,649)	(200,723)
Capital Expenditure	(6,106)	(6,822)	(6,023)	(3,905)	(3,460)	(26,316)
Total cash outflow	(31,436)	(39,591)	(46,406)	(52,496)	(57,108)	(227,037)
Net cash flow = Subvention from WEF	(24,176)	(24,762)	(21,437)	(14,558)	(8,759)	(93,692)

Note: Figures in brackets () indicate deficit projections.

Conclusions

As a publicly supported charity, Wawasan Open University regards transparency in the manner it conducts its business as a moral obligation. It also adheres to the governance traditions of universities in all liberal societies. Since its inauguration in 2006, the University has gained clear evidence that it is reaching out to the segment of society that its founders envisaged. The profile of its learners, the successful provisional accreditation of its programmes, and its brand recognition as a provider of adult learning, all appear to have met with the original expectations and vision of what WOU should become. If its present rate of development, growth and recognition can be sustained, the University will become an interesting model in a region where the responsibility for providing continuous lifelong learning opportunities by open and distance learning methods is commonly expected to rest with government alone.