Assessment and Credentialization
in Online Education: A Malaysian Perspective

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Online Learning in Graduate Education in Malaysia

The use of online learning in postgraduate education has increased tremendously. Implementation of online learning in postgraduate education does not only cover the use of online mediums in delivering lectures, but it has been implemented beyond that, with some universities offering online degree programs through the medium. However, in Malaysia, there are no postgraduate programs being offered entirely online yet. In Malaysia, the use of online mediums in postgraduate education programs is focused more on assisting teaching and learning outside class.

All of the postgraduate programs in Malaysia are accredited by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA). MQA has released two categories of standards, which are considered "General Standard:" Master's and Doctoral Degree by Coursework and Mixed Mode (Coursework and Research), and Master's & Doctoral Degree By Research and Program Standard according to field of studies. Based on the standards, at this moment, MQA does not accredit any postgraduate programs in universities that deliver instructions through entirely online learning mediums. Face-to-face sessions between students and lecturers remain a must in postgraduate education programs in Malaysia. However, MQA encourages universities to integrate the use of online learning in teaching and learning aspects of postgraduate courses. Hence, in Malaysia, it is rare to discuss online degree postgraduate programs. Nevertheless, things should be changing in the future since online learning underscores not only education but many sectors. In various situations, it is difficult to sustain communication through face-to-face interaction, and online communication mediums are the alternative. With the competition in the education business heating up today, Asian countries compete to be in the top rank as global higher education hubs. Consequently, the Malaysian government has to transform beliefs about online learning and has to start acting on the availability and validity of delivering postgraduate programs entirely online.

Having ventured into internationalizing our education sector over a decade ago, Malaysia is at an advantage in this race and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) plays an important role in the Malaysia Higher Education sector. At UTM, we have set up our own e-learning system for postgraduate education courses. Along with the e-learning system, we also join the Open Courseware (OCW) consortium under Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to share part of our established postgraduate education courses with other universities. We believe having only excellent online facilities is not the only key basis for transforming our institution into a global competitor. We need more than that, including a proper blueprint and a proper planning phase for transformation. Therefore, besides the medium itself, our new concept and the perspectives of academia have also played an important role in transforming UTM into a competitive institution. Based on the concept of the New Academia, UTM is set to become an Entrepreneurial Research University characterized by quality education rooted in a deep knowledge culture, high impact contributions, and value-driven initiatives. Through the concept, instructional materials do not solely come from books and journals but also experiences, case studies, Internet-based resources, field work, and the tacit knowledge of individuals. Within the listed materials, the

assessment process is indirectly changing, where assessment through online mediums is made possible and opens up enormous potentials.

Issues Needing to be Resolved

The medium itself, online systems, enable the technical implementation of online learning. However, the remaining issues are how well our professors put their trust in online learning and their commitment to use online learning in their courses. Their beliefs on online learning are closely related to their awareness of the validity and the capability of online education. Other than believing and being committed, our professors require skills in conducting online learning courses. Online learning skills do not only cover the system-based skills, they also cover e-pedagogy as well as social communication skills. Without these skills, the online learning process might not execute effectively. Another issue that needs consideration is the verification of students' participation, credentialization, and assessment of students' learning. As we are aware, an online learning system will only recognize students' records based on username and password. Whether the real student is the one who logs into the system or not can't be detected by the system automatically. This is a difficult issue to be resolved and at this moment, the least that the higher education providers can do is to have a clear policy, rules, and regulations regarding online learning where ethics is the main factor that needs to be enforced. Besides that, triangulation from other sources of assessment mechanisms needs to be conducted such as interviews, paper-based tests, etc.

Challenges in the assessment of student learning through online systems also arise due to the physical distance between educators and students. Besides that, the techniques educators use to assess learning occurring through online mediums are totally different from those used in face-to-face instructions. In face-to-face instructions, the learning process can also be identified from facial expressions and body language, where these behaviors can easily be observed by the educators visually. Such observation is impossible through online learning where the learning process can only be represented by a student's log data, online discussion transcripts, and online tests or quizzes. With a new perspective on how learning takes place in online mediums, we uncover new challenges in analyzing students' online learning process. Few research studies carried out by technology experts and instructional designers have come up with methods to understand how students learn through online mediums. One of the popular research areas is exploring the online interaction between students and students, between students and lecturers, and between students and learning materials. Social interaction during online class work is used to determine the quality of computer-mediated educational programs. Administration of content analysis on the textual materials being produced during online discussion to investigate aspects such as critical thinking and creativity for the purpose of assessment is greatly encouraged nowadays. These concerns are raised due to the shortcomings of online learning in several aspects when compared to face-to-face learning. Although most research states that students describe positive experiences with online learning, there were still some students who perceived online learning as being more challenging than face-to-face courses due to difficulties in communicating with peers, as there is an absence of emotional connection (Jumaat & Tasir, 2013).

With respect to these issues, numerous studies are conducted to understand students' engagement in order to verify the quality of learning. They investigated the extent of the association between students' engagement and academic performances. Several findings, such as a positive but weak relationship between students' engagement and test scores, and a positive correlation between students' engagement and their GPAs, have opened spaces for us as academicians and researchers to explore more (Shukor, Tasir, Van der Meijden, & Harun, 2014).

The Role of Traditional Universities in Online Education

Traditional universities must have a policy for online education in postgraduate programs. Besides a policy, a specific platform and system must be set up by the universities to initiate the implementation of online education. Aligned with system set up, training for the academicians and students must be carried out to have them ready for the new platform of teaching and learning at the postgraduate level. Another important aspect of the implementation of online education is the ICT infrastructure in universities. The Internet bandwidth must be wide enough to support high traffic from students. Besides that, the system itself must be reliable, valid, and able to support system access. In UTM, we have a general e-learning policy. In the policy, our university mentions the owner of the teaching and learning materials, roles of lecturers, students, the ICT office, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Faculties, Universities etc. Besides policy, enforcement of New Academia at UTM also has opened up more spaces for the implementation of online education in graduate education programs. With a complete and proper planning of the use of online education at the postgraduate level, assessment and credentialization in online education can improve not only at the implementation level but also improve awareness and usage among professors at universities.

References

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