Education without borders

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Continuous learning: A wider demographic now has access to tertiary education thanks to ODL. – File photo

THE dishes have been done. The children asleep. The house is finally quiet.

The timing is perfect for Amber to log onto the student portal at the university she is enrolled in to focus on her assignments.

Amber is just one of the many Malaysians who has chosen to pursue her degree via open and distance learning (ODL).

This online method of learning gained traction when the Covid-19 pandemic first blanketed the world.

Online interaction requires more sophisticated technology and is currently being incorporated and utilised in ODL as demand for online learning grows.

It is a matter of time before artificial intelligence (AI), chatbots and other disruptive technology is used to manage and track overall student experience, such as enrolment and grading.

Prof Mohamed Mustafa: Technology can increase access to education.

Higher Education director-general Prof Datuk Seri Dr Mohamed Mustafa Ishak said students will benefit from a robust ICT infrastructure that can support the use of technologies like AI, chatbots, video conferencing, live streaming and other types of technology.

"It has always been the vision of the Higher Education Ministry to make online learning an integral component of higher education and lifelong learning, " he told StarEdu.

In fact, the ministry has kick started several efforts to achieve its vision, all of which are making significant progress.

As an example, he said that the ministry is collaborating with the Malaysian Communications Multimedia and Commissions (MCMC) to improve Internet access that will enable effective online education.

The ministry has also provided information on the 871 Internet centres under the supervision of MCMC nationwide to all public higher education institutions (HEIs).

This will allow for accessibility for all students in the Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak, he added.

Prof Elajsolan:

Advancing technology has certainly played a crucial role in ODL.

Prof Mohamed Mustafa said all public universities are encouraged to share their infrastructure for the benefit of their students.

"This is particularly useful because students need to study and complete assignments while they are in their respective hometowns.

"To ensure the continuity of their education, they can head to the nearest public university to use the facilities there, " he said, referring to infrastructure amenities such as the library and Internet connectivity.

For instance, a student from Universiti Putra Malaysia who is currently in his or her hometown in Kota Kinabalu can go to Universiti Malaysia Sabah to utilise the library and Internet facilities there, he explained.

The country's first open university is Open University Malaysia (OUM). Today, there are 71,866 students enrolled in ODL courses across Malaysia.

Zuwati: ODL is here to stay as it allows everyone access to education from a distance.

Technology can do a lot of things but it is still devoid of ethics and values, said Prof Mohamed Mustafa.

"Thus, value-driven education is crucial to produce balanced graduates who will subsequently become ethical members of society."
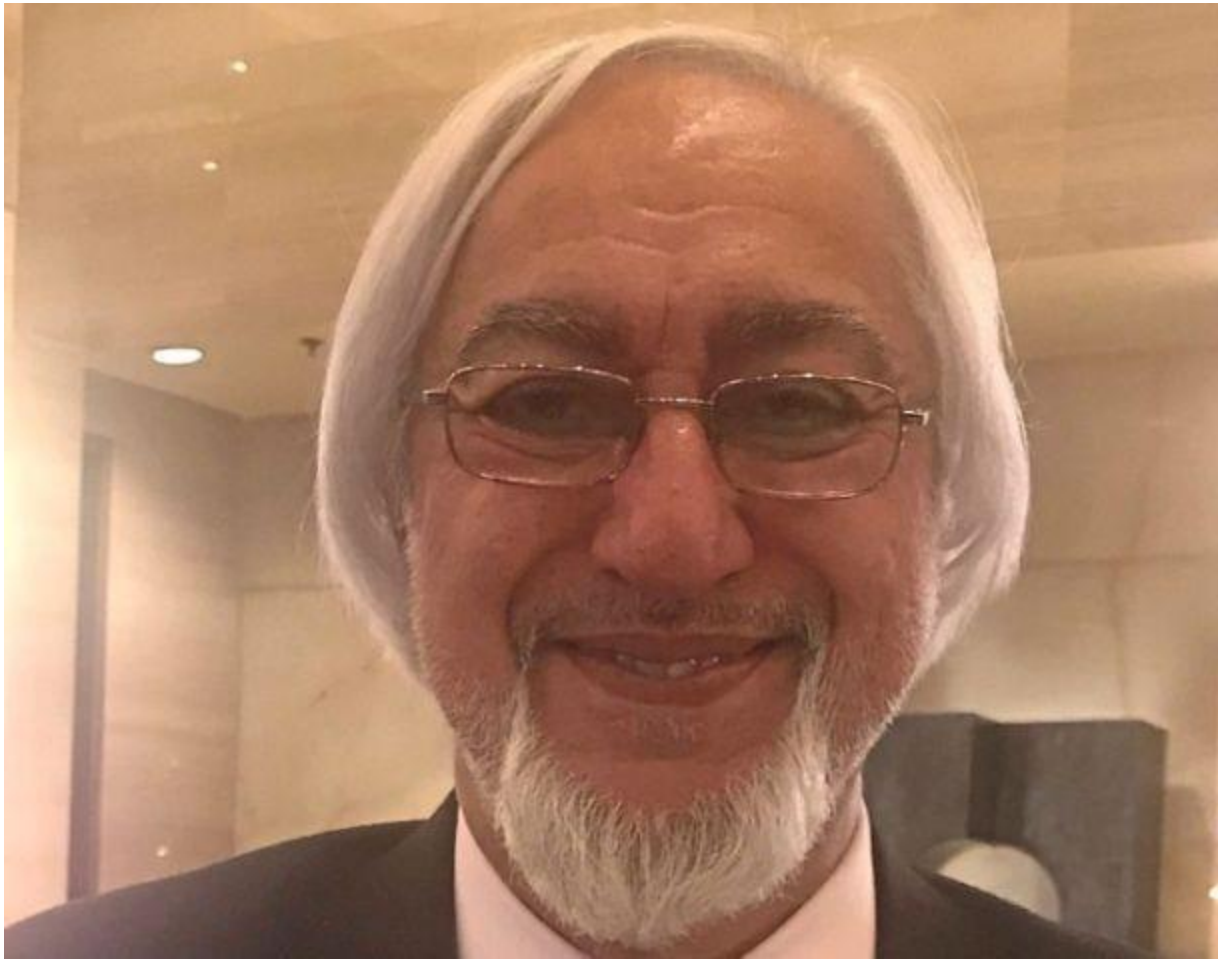
He added that the ministry's ultimate goal is to develop students with the ability to contribute to Malaysian society and actively participate in the global arena.

While HEIs are responsible for designing and executing their own ODL programmes, they have to adhere to the Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation-Open and Distance Learning.

Published by the ministry through the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA), the code is meant to guide HEIs in regulating the quality of educational programmes.

Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities president Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh said technology has enabled delivery of ODL to develop by leaps and bounds and there is a great future for it in Malaysia.

"But it cannot replace face-to-face learning.

Parmjit: ODL enables learners to enhance their qualifications and competence.

"At best, ODL can be used to supplement face-to-face learning, and to support mature learners who would not otherwise have access to educational opportunities, " he added.

The expansion of ODL has brought access to educational opportunities to remote areas and to those to whom education is not normally possible, he said.

This allows for learning and working at the same time, enabling learners to enhance their qualifications and competence levels.

Parmjit believes that a step in this direction will ultimately improve career opportunities.

National Association of Private Educational Institutions (Napei) president Assoc Prof Elajsolan Mohan said advancing technology has certainly played a crucial role in ODL, "especially over the past 10 years with the entry of digital technology, high speed broadband Internet and the more recent virtual reality and augmented reality."

Still, he does not think Malaysia is really ready to go fully ODL.

"We are still behind in technology and geographically we are disadvantaged, especially in remote areas in the Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak where we are unable to reach out."

Providing opportunities for those who missed out

Elajsolan noted that ODL has become popular among working adults who missed the boat in their earlier days and were forced to enter the job market due to family financial constraints.

"This was the baby boomer period – when families were large and parents were not able to educate all their children well.

"Also, children were forced to work at an early stage with no proper qualifications, to support the family."

He said this group has benefitted a lot in upgrading their qualifications and skills using ODL with many having attained postgraduate degrees.

Universiti Malaya's Faculty of Education senior lecturer and teacher-trainer Dr Zuwati Hasim said ODL is here to stay as it allows everyone to have open access to education from a distance besides being more flexible in terms of time and space.

"With the advent of technology, managing ODL becomes a lot easier.

"Nevertheless, ODL can never replace the normal classroom-based learning that requires students to be on campus to meet peers and lecturers face-to-face regularly — the feel is different."

But ODL will still attract local and international students if it is widely implemented, she said, adding that maintaining quality over quantity is more important.