REPORT OF STUDY TOUR TO MALAYSIA

17th - 21st March 2014

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<u>Submitted to:</u>

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth Educational Media Centre of Asia (CEMCA) has been offering study tour opportunities to teachers, academics and administrators to understand the best practices followed by other Open Universities of the Commonwealth Asia. The following persons were nominated to visit Malaysia between **17th and 21st March, 2014**:

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CEMCA planned and organized the tour for the team to visit the following institutions, namely:

Open University Malaysia (OUM), Kuala Lumpur,

Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Kuala Lumpur, and

Wawasan Open University (WOU), Georgetown.

OBJECTIVES OF THE TOUR

- To study the ODL system of Malaysia in the context of the Higher Education system of the country;
- To review the functioning of the two major Open universities namely: Open University Malaysia and Wawasan Open university;
- To find out the role of Malaysian Qualifications Agency in assuring quality of all Higher Education Institutions; and
- To study the *Code of Practice for ODL* developed specially by MQA for accrediting distance learning programmes.

COUNTRY PROFILE

Federation of Malaya became independent from Britain in 1957. Today it is a federal constitutional monarchy consisting of thirteen states and three federal territories and has a total landmass of 329,847 square kilometres (127,350 sq mi) separated by some 640 miles of the South China Sea into two similarly sized regions, Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Borneo. The head of state is the king, who is an elected monarch chosen from the hereditary rulers of the nine Malay states every five years. The government system is closely modelled on the parliamentary system and therefore the head of government is the Prime Minister.

It has a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society that comprises mainly Malay, followed by a sizeable Chinese population and an Indian community. Ethnic Malays comprise some 60% of the population. Chinese constitute around 26%; Indians and indigenous peoples make up the rest. The communities coexist in relative harmony, although there is little racial interaction which is evident from the recent court ruling overturning the previously taken (in 2009) court's decision that allowed non-Muslims to use the word Allah to refer to God. However as per the recent court ruling (taken in 2013) non-Muslims cannot use the word Allah to refer to God even in their own faiths. Interestingly, if Malay wishes to marry non Malay, the non Malay person has to convert to Islam.

Although since 1971 Malays have benefited from positive discrimination that the then government introduced in the form of minimum quotas for Malays in business, education and the civil service, ethnic Chinese continue to hold economic power and are the wealthiest community. However, the Malays remain the dominant group in politics.

Since independence, Malaysia has had one of the best economic records in Asia, with GDP growing an average 6.5% for almost 50 years. The economy has traditionally been fuelled by its natural resources. Malaysia is one of Asia's most vibrant economies and is a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is one of the wealthiest and most developed countries, outranked in GNP only by Singapore and oil-rich Brunei in south-east Asia. Malaysia's economy is expected to grow by 4.5 percent in 2013 after 5.6 percent in 2012, before accelerating to close to 5 percent in 2014 and 2015, according to a new World Bank report.

COUNTRY PROFILE: FACTS

Population	29,628,392 (July 2013 est.)
Age structure	**0-14 years:** 29.1% (male 4,433,911/female 4,186,635) **15-24 years:** 17% (male 2,552,709/female 2,487,366) **25-54 years:** 41.3% (male 6,195,754/female 6,027,160) **55-64 years:** 7.4% (male 1,112,529/female 1,069,036) **65 years and over:** 5.3% (male 739,696/female 823,596) (2013 est.)
Urbanization	**Urban Population:** 72.8% of total population (2011) **Rate of Urbanization:** 2.49% annual rate of change (2010-15 est.)

Major cities - population	Kuala Lumpur (capital) 1.493 million; Klang 1.071 million; Johor Bahru 958,000 (2009)
Ethnic groups	Malay 50.4%, Chinese 23.7%, indigenous 11%, Indian 7.1%, others 7.8% (2004 est.)
Religions	Muslim (or Islam - official) 60.4%, Buddhist 19.2%, Christian 9.1%, Hindu 6.3%, Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions 2.6%, other or unknown 1.5%, none 0.8% (2000 census)
Languages	Bahasa Malaysia (official), English, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainan, Foochow), Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Panjabi, Thai ***Note:*** *in East Malaysia there are several indigenous languages; most widely spoken are Iban and Kadazan*
Literacy	**Definition:** age 15 and over can read and write **Total Population:** 93.1% **Male:** 95.4% **Female:** 90.7% (2010 est.)
Education Expenditures	5.1% of GDP (2010); 6.3% of GDP (2012)

Source: http://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/demographics_profile.html

Education is a cornerstone of Malaysia's economic transformation. It is a lynchpin of Malaysia's transformation into a high-income, sustainable and inclusive economy. According to the World Bank Report (Sander, et.al, 2013; p. 46)

"A high-performing education system is therefore one characterized by coverage, quality and equity.

- Coverage: is every child in school?
- Quality: are children learning, and what can they do with what they learn?
- Equity: are children of every income level, ethnic group, gender and geographical area able to access quality education?

Malaysia's education system has achieved extensive coverage. Enrolment of the primary level has been nearly universal for decades while secondary level enrolment has also expanded rapidly, with the share of the labor force with a secondary education increasing from 37 percent in 1982 to 58 percent in 2012… Relatively small gaps are observed along ethnic, income, gender or geographic lines with respect to access to pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education. Nevertheless, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds form a disproportionate share of those enrolling in post-secondary education.

Tertiary enrolments are low compared to high-income countries and will likely need to expand significantly for Malaysia to complete its transition to a high-income economy. The tertiary gross enrolment rate for Malaysia (36percent) has remained below the high-income OECD average (72 percent) and considerably below that in Korea (100 percent).

Raising education quality will be critical for Malaysia to achieve a high-performing education system that builds the human capital required for an innovation-led, high-income economy" (Sander, et.al, 2013).

CURRENT HIGHER EDUCATION SCENARIO

The higher education sector is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). MOHE's Vision is to make Malaysia a centre of higher education excellence by the year 2020 and internationalising Malaysian education. In its effort to be the hub of higher education excellence in Southeast Asia MOHE had launched the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) 2007-2020 in August 2007 to achieve world-class status among its universities. The Action Plan focused on seven strategic thrust areas namely:

1. Widening access and enhancing quality
2. Improving the quality of teaching and learning
3. Enhancing research and innovation
4. Strengthening institution of higher education
5. Intensifying internationalization
6. Enculturation of lifelong learning
7. Reinforcing Higher Education Ministry's Delivery System

The Action Plan also laid out strategies to achieve world-class universities in Malaysia (Wan Muda, 2008).

Malaysia is currently ranked the world's 11th most preferred study destination by UNESCO. There are more than 100,000 international students from more than 100 countries studying in Malaysia, pursuing courses ranging from diplomas and degrees to Masters and PhDs at universities, colleges and foreign university branch campuses. Their choice of Malaysia as the place to acquire a globally-recognised academic qualification is a strong indicator of their confidence in the country as an education hub. Efforts are to improve the world ranking of Malaysian universities and to have 150,000 international students by 2015.

The Malaysian government is committed to its vision of turning the country into a high quality education hub for students from all over the globe. The country's Ministry of Higher Education monitors all institutions to ensure they adhere to the highest standards. As a result, many reputed foreign universities from countries like the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand have come to Malaysia, either to set up branch campuses or to enter into collaboration with Malaysian institutions. These universities offer undergraduate and post-graduate degree programmes that are identical to their main campuses overseas. To date, the following foreign university branch campuses have been set up in Malaysia which is listed in the box given below (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2012).

Higher education providers in Malaysia can be grouped into two major categories (MOHE, 2009):

▪ Public higher educational institutions (government funded), which consist of :
  - Public universities
  - Polytechnics
  - Community colleges

- Private higher educational institutions, which consist of :
  - Private universities
  - Private university-colleges
  - Foreign university branch campuses
  - Private colleges

Malaysia has 20 public universities, 53 private universities and six foreign university branch campuses; 403 active private colleges, 30 polytechnics and 73 public community colleges in 2011. The 20 public universities can be divided into five research, four broad-based and 11 specialized universities. The five public universities that have been designated as research universities are Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Teknologi Malayisa (UTM). USM has also been awarded Apex university status (Study Malaysia , 2014).

In the 2012 five public universities have been given autonomy in administration, human resources, financial and academic management and student intake. They are Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. This move is aimed at encouraging excellence among local institutions of higher learning (MOHE, 2012).

FOREIGN PROVIDERS IN MALAYSIA

- Monash University, Australia
- Curtin University Sarawak Campus, Australia
- University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, UK
- Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus, Australia
- Newcastle University Medicine Malaysia, UK
- Netherlands Maritime College, The Netherlands
- Manipal International University, India

Source: http://www.educationmalaysia.gov.my/global-education-hub/quality-education/internationally-recognised-qualification/

Other Universities that plan to open branch campuses here include UK's University of Southampton, Jaipur National University, University of Reading and Xiamen University

The advantage of studying at these university branch campuses in Malaysia is that a student will get a degree identical with that of the main campus at a more affordable cost. Also, the tuition fees for the same programmes are lower at the Malaysian campus, resulting in substantial savings.

Mindful of the trust placed on it by international students, Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education monitors all institutions to ensure they adhere to the highest standards. In line with this, it established the Education Malaysia Global Services with the primary objective of promoting Malaysia as a global education destination providing high-quality study programmes of international standards (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2012).

Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education has also set up the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) which undertakes the implementation of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework. MQA is also responsible for quality assurance and the accreditation of courses and other related functions, covering both public and private higher educational institutions. The establishment of the MQA and the implementation of the MQF are expected to benefit national higher education and the development of human capital, in line with the Malaysian government's vision of turning the country into a high quality education hub for students from all over the globe.

Malaysia's first rating system SETARA (Rating System for Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia) was implemented in 2009 to measure the performance of undergraduate teaching and learning in universities and university colleges in Malaysia. The SETARA result was measured using a six-tier category with Tier 6 identified as Outstanding and Tier 1 as Weak. Subsequently, another rating system was introduced in 2011. My QUEST (Malaysian Quality Evaluation System for Private Colleges) was used to evaluate private colleges in Malaysia in terms of the quality of students, programmes, graduates, resources and governance. The MyQUEST rating categorized an institution as either excellent, good, or weak. The institutions would also receive a rating based on their level of achievement which ranged from 1 star (poor) to 6 stars (excellent) (ICEF, 2013).

These two rating systems serve as a reliable reference for students and parents in their selection of institutions and programmes of study offered by various HEIs.

Recently MQA has also introduced the Discipline-Based Rating System (D-SETARA) developed and implemented to assess the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs to rate the institutional level quality of teaching and learning of specific (clusters of) disciplines at level six (undergraduate level) of the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) in universities and university colleges. The system, the first of its kind, is a complement to the existing institutional rating through Sistem Penarafan Institusi Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia (SETARA) which has been successfully carried out for several years. Whilst SETARA focuses on the institution, D-SETARA focuses on the schools or faculties where the respective discipline is offered. The spirit is one of benchmarking against a set of quality standards for the purpose of improvement of the institution and discipline but not for competition between the institutions. The first D-SETARA exercise focuses on four clusters of disciplines: Engineering; Medicine, Dentistry and Pharmacy; Health Sciences; and Hospitality and Tourism. Participation in D-SETARA is however voluntary (MQA, 2013).

However, Malaysian universities have failed to feature in the latest Times Higher Education World Reputation rankings released in 2014 despite MOHE's goals to make Malaysia an education hub for the region and attract some 200,000 students to local universities by 2020. The only Times Higher Education survey that Malaysia made the cut was last year's 100 Universities in Emerging Countries, where Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia took the 77th spot while Universiti Putra Malaysia was in the 95th place (Zachariah, 2014) .

Meanwhile, the drive for international students and universities continues. The country is supporting the development – mostly privately funded – of two education "cities" (ICEF, 2013):

- "Kuala Lumpur Education City (KCEC), launched in 2007, that aims to house both international and local universities, as well as primary and secondary schools in a 500-acre KLEC Academic Park. The hub will offer education from University of Cambridge's Judge Business

School, Epsom College, and Universiti Sains Malaysia (and potentially other schools) to those in the region with an expected student population of nearly 30,000.

- EduCity at Iskandar is a similar idea: a 350-acre campus on which several universities will be housed as well as elaborate sports and leisure facilities including a 14,000-seater stadium and an Olympic-length swimming pool. The idea is to create a "student village" of about 16,000 students on the campus, where students from each university share access to the amazing recreational and sports facilities. Several universities are already open in EduCity, with more about to start. EduCity which will open as a full campus in 2015 is one of Malaysia's main prongs in the country's effort to attract foreign students. "

STATUS OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

All like new nations, Malaysia too made concerted efforts to expand its education base by replicating the model left behind by their rulers. Inspite of the expansion of the education sector the educational requirements of the masses could not be achieved. Moreover with the progress of democracy; literacy and mass education became more essential for increasing participation in the political and economic systems. Distance education (DE) in the form of correspondence education was introduced to overcome the limitations of the conventional system. In 1971 Universiti Sains Malaysia became the pioneer to tertiary level institution to offer undergraduate level programmes via distance learning. In 1993 the government embarked upon a policy of encouraging universities to offer programmes via distance mode resulting in several universities joining the fray in offering distance learning programmes. As distance learning was fast becoming the way of providing education to the masses, hence in August 1999, the Minister of Education invited Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations Sdn. Bhd. (METEOR), a consortium of 11 public universities in the country, to set up an open university at the national level. The move by the Minister led to the establishment of Open University Malaysia (OUM) in August 2000. Since then three more open universities (OUs) were set up namely, Wawasan Open University (WOU) in 2006, Al-Madinah International University (MEIDU) in 2007 and Asia e-University (AeU) in 2008 (MQA, 2013a). Besides these four OUs, there are several dual mode universities offering distance learning programmes.

The open and distance learning (ODL) mode in Malaysia, like in other developing countries, is specifically targeted at working adults who need to 'earn while they learn' in order to be able to take care of their families as well as manage their careers while pursuing higher education. Therefore majority of the distance learners in Malaysia are working adults.

Open University Malaysia (OUM) since its establishment in August 2000 as a private not-for-profit HEI, is playing a major role in furthering the government agenda of catering to the educational needs of adults particularly working adults. Its vision is to be a leading provider of flexible learning in the country.

It was the first HEI to obtain approval from the then Ministry of Education to implement an open entry system. Thus an alternative path for prospective learners to gain entry into the mainstream of higher education has been provided. As a result of which OUM also considers applicant's prior learning and work experiences.

As on date, OUM offers more than 50 accredited programmes and has over 145000 learners out of which 47000 have graduated from OUM. OUM has set up 36 Learning Centres in Malaysia and international learning centres in 10 foreign countries. The programmes offered are ranging from diploma level to Doctoral degree level programmes. There are both general and professional programmes and the only technical programme is PhD in Engineering to attract outstanding individuals from various industrial sectors as well as academic research institutions. It is noteworthy that OUM has introduced a compulsory course for all learners irrespective of their level, titled *Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners* (OUM, 2014).

It is mandatory for staff to attend capacity building programmes.
OUM has set up the *Quality, Research and Innovation Council* that undertakes quality enhancement initiatives within the university. The *Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI)* acts as a secretariat to this Council. The university has a quality policy that has been outlined and procedures have been documented in the *Quality Manual*. Based on the *Quality Manual* service operations manuals are developed at the departmental level. The IQRI plays a major role in creating quality awareness and instilling a culture of quality among the staff and in ensuring that internal and external quality assurance processes are in place by planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing all quality initiatives of the university. IQRI is also responsible for obtaining accreditation from MQA for all academic programmes.

OUM has also undergone ISO certification (Malaysian Standards MS ISO 9001: 2008) for all core processes and the following departments that meet the standards are: *Registry, Centre for Instructional Design and Technology, Centre for Student Management* and *Digital Library*.

OUM utilizes the Balanced Scorecard, a performance based management tool to measure and monitor the performance of the university against the vision and mission and approved budget.

OUM launches new programmes based on market demand and in consultation with relevant industry or professional bodies. It conducts periodic programme review based on internal self-review, inputs from external examiners or Board of Studies and by obtaining feedback from learners and tutors.

Besides conducting internal audits it also participates in external audits such as that of MQA which is of course mandatory but also by other agencies such as International Council of Distance Education, Norway, International Standards Organization, etc.

OUM has many technological solutions to higher education that have been developed and devised by their own teams working at *Centre for Instructional Design and Technology*. This Centre has developed many technology applications to support learning endeavours of its learners by developing eGate (a gateway for English resources), Math Resource Centre (mathematics portal), i-

Tutorials, i-Lectures. i-Radio (radio webcast service) and OUM App. Through this App learners can access more than 70 course modules and elearning resources through their mobile devices.

Online Assignment Submission Platform (i-Tutorials) facilitates online submission of assignments by learners. In order to ensure that the assignments are not copied the platform has a plagiarism detector called Similarity Check, to check dishonest practices. i-Lectures are video lectures that can be viewed 24x7 from anywhere.

It has a developed the Centralized Module Inventory Management System and i-Campus Student Management System to monitor availability of stocks and timely dispatch of study material to its distance learners and Learning Centres.

OUM has its own LMS *myVLE* that supports both academic and administrative activities/ interactions through discussion forums, chat rooms, bulletin boards etc to cater to the expanding needs of the learners and the institution as well. The LMS allows the learners to communicate with the institution and their peers and access learning resources more effectively.

OUM has set up the *Institute for Teaching Learning Advancement* to promote continuous enhanced student learning through the development of scholarly teaching and assessment curriculum design and student learning.

Learners' queries are handled by the *Electronic Customer Relationship Management* (eCRM) system.

It has a *Digital Library* with a wide collection of physical books and reference material and e-resources such as online databases, e-journals, e-books, e-content.

(Acknowledge the use of Ali & Fadzil (2013) in preparing this section)

Wawasan Open University (WOU), like OUM is a private not-for-profit HEI. It was established in August 2006 with the main objective of enhancing access to industry-relevant quality higher education for working adults in Malaysia which is reflected in its mission: "*We commit ourselves to the expansion of opportunities in higher education and to teaching excellence aimed at increasing the level of knowledge and scholarship among all Malaysians.*"

WOU has developed a proper system to support lifelong learning by allowing its learners a multi entry and multi exit progression pathway. More than 12,000 working professionals in Malaysia have enrolled at WOU. WOU has opened 6six Regional offices in different parts of the country and three Regional Support Centres for supporting it s learners residing in different parts of Malaysia.

Programmes offered by the university are market driven and support the national agenda to contribute to the knowledge economy through production of graduates with high levels of knowledge and skills. As on date, WOU offers 44 programmes ranging from the sub-degree to postgraduate levels in the fields of business, technology, education and liberal studies, including four MBA programmes.

Although it is an OU, WOU commenced full-time face to face degree programmes at its main campus since September 2013. The WOU on Campus learning has been specifically designed and packaged for fresh post-secondary school leavers and diploma holders.

WOU has an *International Advisory Board* that advises the Vice Chancellor on the best international practices and the latest developments in ODL such as adoption of new technology and improving the functioning of the ODL system.

The university has set up a *Quality Assurance Unit* (QAU) that documents, coordinates and oversees the implementation of quality assurance practices across the university and ensures continuous improvement measures.

WOU has an overarching policy document, the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) Framework that requires all schools/departments to document their respective processes and procedures, based on a prescribed format. This ensures dissemination of information to all relevant stakeholders. The QAU maintains and updates digital records of all the University SOPs.

The development of new programs at WOU involves a rigorous approval process. The Outlined Program Proposal (OPP) is vetted by members of the external advisory peer group (consisting of senior academics and industry leaders) that ensures academic benchmarking and industry relevance. This exercise is done before the university submits its application for provisional accreditation to MQA.

Before submitting its application for full accreditation, the university appoints an External Program Assessor (EPA) who is a senior academic holding the rank of Professor, evaluates the program's performance. The EPA's independent report is submitted directly to the Vice Chancellor.

WOU follows the Course Team (CT) approach. Each team includes an external writer with subject expertise, one or more internal academics, a course designer and a Web programmer. A senior academic (Associate Professor and above) in the same discipline from another University is appointed as the External Course Assessor (ECA).The draft units developed by course writers are reviewed by the CT and subsequently forwarded to the ECA for comments. The written comments from the ECA are reviewed by the CT, and where appropriate, the necessary changes are incorporated.

At WOU the Course Coordinator (CC) has a major responsibility of adding value to the course materials by assuring the correctness of the contents and leveraging on the expertise to add new perspectives to the contents, design imaginative assessment strategies for 'formative' learning, work in tandem with course designers and publishers to enhance the learning experience by – developing supplementary materials, quizzes etc that need to be uploaded on the Course LMS before the commencement of the semester. The CC prepares guidelines for the tutors detailing out the topics, the treatment of the subject / content and the activities to be undertaken in each counselling/ tutorial session. After the course commences it is the duty of the CC to monitor the performance of all new tutors supporting the learners. CC monitors the marking of assignments by the tutors and provides feedback on performance to the tutor. The performance of the tutors in the LMS is also monitored by the CC, and those who do not provide satisfactory service to the students are flagged and counselled by the CC. At the end of each semester, the CC submits an evaluation report for each tutor.

WOU believes in taking proper feedback from its tutors and learners through meetings at regional offices. A course-specific survey questionnaire is also administered to the learners to obtain feedback on the quality of course materials, performance of tutors at tutorials and assignment marking, library, and online support via the LMS. Further, the Education Technology and Publishing (ETP) unit collates all feedback, and reports are made available to the individual CCs to place it before the Heads of Academic Units and through them upwards even to the Senate for bringing about the desired change.

Like course development the evaluation system has inbuilt quality assurance practices. All assignments and examination papers are vetted by internal peers followed by the intervention of external examiners, who review the exam paper and the marking guide. An examination paper evaluator is assigned approximately one hundred scripts to reduce errors caused by fatigue. Even the evaluation done by an evaluator is strictly monitored. 5 percent or 12 scripts (whichever is higher) evaluated are selected from the low, medium, and high mark range for monitoring by the internal examiner. A maximum total variation of 5 percent for the whole paper is acceptable. Beyond this, remarking is mandatory.

It is mandatory for new staff to undergo an orientation program following which they are assigned to mentors who provide advice and assistance as needed. Academic staff members are also required to undertake a formal seven-module ODL Core Competency Training program that leads to internal certification. Staff performance is assessed through an annual key performance indicator-based appraisal system covering all key areas. Annual increment and bonus payments are performance based and clear cut policies on appointment and promotion are laid down and implemented in a transparent manner. The university has set up the *Institute of Research and Innovation* to encourage research activities among the staff that provides seed funding to staff.

WOU has its own LMS *WawasanLearn* that students can access for additional supplementary materials, resource websites, discussions with members of their tutorial groups and from other parts of the country, exchanges with tutors and academic staff, assignments, quizzes etc.

Tutors are available for consultation and counselling via telephone at appointed times and also via email and in limited face to face sessions. The University's electronic library resources are available 24×7 from anywhere providing access to e-books, e-journals, supplementary study materials and additional references.

(Acknowledge the use of Wong &Liew (2013) in preparing this section)

In Malaysia, all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) require prior approval from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to operate. All programmes offered by HEIs must obtain provisional accreditation by the MQA and approval by the MOHE before they admit any learners. Provisionally accredited programmes must get full accreditation from MQA before the first intake achieves graduation. MQA was formerly known as the National Accreditation Board (LAN), established under the Lembaga Akreditasi Negara Act 1996 prior to its merger with the Quality Assurance Division under the MOHE in December 2005. The new entity Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), was established on 1 November 2007 with the coming in force of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007. MQA is an independent autonomous body with a mandate to accredit academic programs provided by educational institutions providing post secondary or higher education and facilitate the recognition and articulation of qualifications.

The MQA administers the *Malaysian Qualifications Framework* (MQF) which is a unified system of post secondary qualifications offered on a national basis in Malaysia. The MQF is an instrument that classifies qualifications based on a set of approved criteria and benchmarked against international best practices, and which clarifies the earned academic levels, learning outcomes of study areas and credit system based on student's academic load. These criteria are accepted and used for all qualifications awarded by recognised higher education providers. Hence, MQF integrates with and links all national qualifications. MQF also provides educational pathways through which it links qualifications systematically. These pathways will enable the individual to progress through credit transfers and accreditation of prior experiential learning, in the context of lifelong learning.

Student achievements are measured by learning outcomes. These learning outcomes distinguish the varying competencies as to what a student will be able to do at the end of a period of study.
Learning outcomes are based on eight domains (MQA, 2013):
 i. Knowledge;
 ii. Practical skill;
 iii. Social skills and responsibilities;
 iv. Values, attitudes and professionalism;
 v. Communication, leadership and team skills;
 vi. Problem solving and scientific skill;
 vii. Information management and lifelong learning skill; and
 viii. Managerial and entrepreneurial skills.

Learning outcomes are linked to the credit system which gives value to student learning time and are not based on the contact hours between lecturers and students. The methods of achieving learning outcomes is not just limited to formal system but includes attainments through formal, informal and non formal learning. In Malaysia 40 hours of notional student learning time is valued as one credit. This definition of credit and academic load is accepted and used in UK, Australia, New Zealand and European qualifications frameworks. The uniformity in meaning and comparability of various national qualifications, eases student mobility, supports curriculum development and simplifies recognition at the international level. The credit system supports the varied mode of delivery whether full time or part time, and even non- structured learning in informal and non formal sectors.
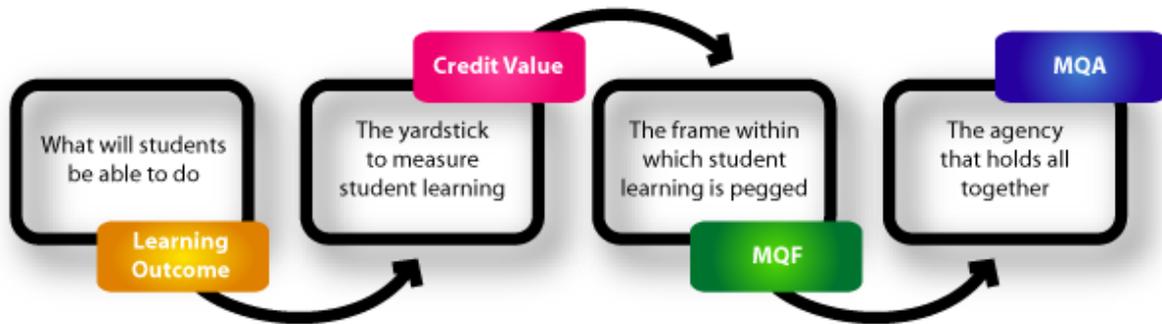
MQA has developed a code of practice on criteria and standards for higher education in Malaysia. This code of practice is benchmarked against international good practices and nationally accepted by stakeholders through various consultations. MQA applies an outcome based approach and has identified nine areas for evaluation with emphasis on self review and self assessment by the HEI followed by MQA institutional audit, making recommendations for improvement, and monitoring progress.

In general, MQA quality assures programmes through two distinct processes (MQA, 2013):

i. Provisional Accreditation - is an exercise to determine whether a programme has met the minimum quality requirements preliminary to Full Accreditation.

ii. Full Accreditation - is an assessment exercise to ascertain that the teaching, learning and all other related activities of a programme provided by a higher education provider has met the quality standards and in compliance with the MQF.

The MQA Act 2007 also provides for the conferment of a self accrediting status to mature higher education institutions that have well established internal quality assurance mechanisms. To be so conferred, the higher education institution needs to undergo an institutional audit, and if successful, all qualifications it offers will be automatically registered in the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR).

The processes above are further supported by continuous monitoring to ensure the programmes offered by the institutions are always quality assured.

Thus, all HEIs have to undergo three stages of development to achieve the *Self Accrediting Institution* status. The three stages are as follows:

Stage I: Programme accreditation stage, where all new programmes are provisionally accredited before students are admitted and full accredited prior to the graduation of first batch of students.

Stage II: Institutional audit (IA) stage where the HEI having completed a few cycles of programme accreditation, applies to MQA to undertake IA. After achieving excellent ratings in the IA a HEI is invited by the MOHE to undertake Stage III audit.

Stage III: Self Accrediting Institution Certification (SAIC) is the final stage when a HEI need not go for any further accreditation by MQA.

A set of standards and code of practice has been developed by the MQA to help HEIs enhance their academic programmes and increase their institutional effectiveness through self reviews and

internal assessments as well as external audits. The following are the codes of practice to which HEIs are expected to adhere to:

- The Code of Practice for Program Accreditation (COPPA) (programme design and delivery and programme accreditation is based on this)
- The Code of Practice for Institutional Audit (COPIA) (inputs for conduct of self reviews or for external audit by HEI is provided)

PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION PROCESS – THE CASE OF WOU
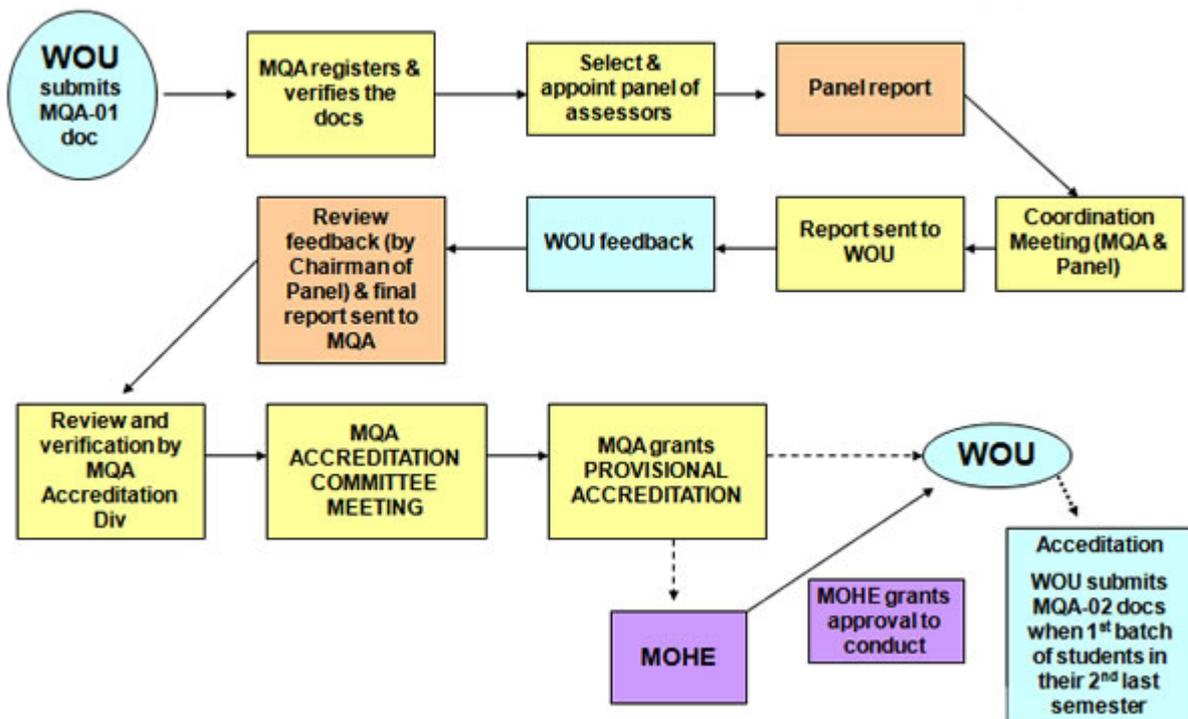
This is a major initiative of the government to ensure quality in the system. As a result of this exercise four long standing public universities and four branch campuses of foreign universities have been awarded SAIC status.

Till recently all OUs had to undergo the same exercise as there was no separate instrument developed by MQA. However MQA has recently developed the ***Code of Practice for Open and Distance Learning***- guidelines intended for HEIs offering distance learning programmes for accreditation and programme audit purposes. This document is also a ready reckoner for HEIs for designing quality distance learning programmes. The document outlines a mechanism of quality assurance for ODL programmes using the nine areas identified in COPPA by MQA for this purpose (MQA, 2013a):

i.   Vision, mission and learning outcomes;
ii.   Curriculum design and delivery;
iii.   Student selection and support services;
iv.   Assessment of students;
v.   Academic staff;
vi.   Educational resources;
vii.   Programme monitoring and review;

viii.   Leadership, governance and administration; and

ix.   Continual quality improvement.

Detailed standards at the minimum level (benchmarked standards) and also at a higher level (Enhanced standards) have been laid down for each of the above mentioned areas.
Some highlights are presented below:

Vision, mission and learning outcomes
The HEI's academic programmes should complement the vision of the institution. Hence the expected learning outcomes should be explicitly made known to the stakeholders. The programme objectives and goals should be in sync with the national and global developments. These also need to be periodically reviewed in consultation with all stakeholders.

Curriculum design and delivery
The faculty/department must have the autonomy over academic matters. The department must follow a definite process for curriculum design and development, review and evaluation. Programme should be considered only after need assessment has been done. The institution should have policies pertaining to IPR and licensing. Innovations should be always there to keep abreast with the latest advancements in ODL.

Assessment of students
Methods of assessment need to be clearly defined and support the learning outcomes. Mechanisms should be in place to ensure validity, reliability and fairness of assessment methods employed. Formative and summative assessment is a must. Review of the assessment methods should be done regularly.. Policy for handling plagiarism is a must.

Student selection and support services
HEI must have a admission and retention policy. HEI must conduct orientation programme for its distance learners. A designated unit should be entrusted with this responsibility. Academic and career counselling needs to be provided. There must be a policy for active student participation and creation of alumni.

Academic staff
HEI must have a recruitment policy for academic and non academic staff and documents pertaining to their service conditions, promotions etc. Recruitment of academic staff that besides the subject expertise also has knowledge of Andragogy, IT skills and student support is necessary. Training of the staff and continuous professional development must be done. Incentives to reward innovations must be there.

Educational resources
Adequate educational resources are necessary to support the teaching- learning activities in accordance with the nature of the programme and its specific requirements. Adequate physical and financial resources and services are crucial. The learning environment should be regularly improved based on active research in ODL. There should be unit dedicated to research and development. There must be a policy on credit transfer/ exemption.

Programme monitoring and review
Academic programmes need to be regularly monitored, reviewed and evaluated to ascertain programme objectives are being met. Based on the feedback programmes and their delivery should be improved.

Leadership, governance and administration
The ODL leadership should be competent to know, develop, manage, implement and lead the ODL programme. The leadership should be able to create a conducive environment to generate creativity and innovation in services and delivery.

Continual quality improvement
ODL institutions should demonstrate to be dynamic organizations and should continually engage in reviewing and monitoring activities so as to meet the demands of the constantly changing environment.

MQA has also put a limit for entry into ODL programmes i.e minimum age of 20 years.

Process of Accreditation followed by MQA

STEP 1: The HEI applies to MQA for provisional accreditation. It normally takes three months for MQA to process the application and declare provisional accreditation as MQA forwards the application to other professional bodies to get their recommendations. Professional Boards do not normally give approval to professional degree programmes through distance mode. The MQA constitutes a team of experts to examine the application and based on its recommendation awards provisional accreditation to the programme/s.

After obtaining the approval, the HEI launches the programme/s and admits students.

STEP 2: Prior to the graduation of first batch of students, the HEI has to get its programme/s full accredited by MQA. Since the process takes four to seven months the HEI has to apply well in advance. MQA sends the same team of experts that had examined the application for provisional accreditation. The team visits the institution over 2-3 days. The HEI goes through a rigorous self-evaluative exercise before the MQA external audit. Also it may be noted that a HEI has a separate internal unit that is in-charge of continuous quality improvement of the institution and also of coordinating the peer team visit. The peer team gives its recommendations for full accreditation for a period ranging from three to five years.
In case the HEI is not satisfied it can appeal to the Minister for reconsideration.
Based on the Peer team's report the MQA declares the programme/s to be fully accredited.
Both the lists of the programmes accredited by MQA namely that of provisional as well as full accreditation are placed in the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR), for the benefit of all stakeholders.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Malaysian government's commitment and efforts to transform the education system in the context of rising international education standards and order to keep pace with the competitive global economy, is targetted to equip Malaysians to:

- think critically and creatively;
- have the skills to succeed in the 21st century; and
- be able to communicate with the rest of the world.

It is indeed a laudable effort and a good example for a developing country like India.

In Malaysia, all institutions of higher learning must obtain approval from Ministry of Education to run the respective academic programmes and must be provisionally accredited by MQA before these can be offered to students and fully accredited before the first batch passes out. All accredited programmes are placed in the Malaysian Qualifications Register (MQR) displayed on the MQA website (*http://www.mqa.gov.my/mqr/carianakr.cfm*.). This is a good practice that we can adopt. Such transparency is beneficial to all stakeholders and particularly for students and the employers. No distinction is being made by MQA between conventional and ODL institutions. Hence the awards obtained through distance study (ODL mode) cannot be discriminated against.

MQA's process of programme accreditation and institutional audit and finally self accreditation is a well thought out process with proper documentation of expected standards/ benchmarks at the threshold and modal levels. The applications designed by MQA are very exhaustive and cover all major aspects of accreditation.

The MQA document, namely the Code of Practice for Open and Distance Learning will be of particular interest to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India and the University Grants Commission, as they are in the process of finalizing new regulations for the ODL system of the India.

Both the OUs visited by the team, displayed dynamic leadership, good governance, a robust and quality ODL system. The OUs have developed academic programmes that are industry relevant and meet market demand. By setting up Quality Assurance Department that is exclusively working for augmenting quality-related activities, it is beneficial to the institution for organizing activities pertaining to accreditation. The Quality Assurance Department plays a major role in creating quality awareness and instilling a culture of quality among the staff and in ensuring that internal and external quality assurance processes are in place by planning, implementing, monitoring and reviewing all quality initiatives of the university. In both institutions, all processes are documented against prescribed benchmarks as laid down by MQA and thereafter conscious efforts are made to monitor the functioning of the institution at all levels. Further, the setting up of a separate department of Instructional Design by these OUs has enabled them to systematically develop a roadmap with regard to the adoption of new technological solutions (new ICT) for improving the delivery of instruction; supporting the learners in their learning endeavours and enhancing the learning experience of the learners.

Both OUM and WOU have clearly established themselves as providers of quality higher education using distance education methods suited to the work and lifestyle of adult Malaysians.

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