Issues and Implementation of ODL: Implications for a Policy in Brunei Darussalam

Awang Othman bin Haji Simbran
Assistant Director, Brunei Darussalam National Accreditation
Council, Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam
Email: othman@moe.edu.bn

A. Introduction

In spite of the universally accepted potential benefits of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, education delivery in Brunei Darussalam is still based on entirely, on a formal conventional system of education. This is attributed to its smallness in terms of geographical area whereby all points in and around the country are accessible, and that education could be provided and delivered through conventional method.

In addition, in view of its small population and stable economy, Brunei has been able to provide favourable and accommodating educational infrastructure and set out policies that allow opportunity for Bruneians to access education in the conventional way. Consequently, ODL has not established any significant inroads as alternative modes of accessing education in Brunei Darussalam.

Despite the absence of any substantive plan to adopt this system of education delivery, Brunei Darussalam nonetheless, acknowledges the potential benefits of ODL in which among others include; expanding access of education; its flexibility and versatility in fulfilling constant retraining and upgrading

requirements in an ever changing market economy; including its perceived cost effectiveness and lesser cost features. Focus of ODL is describe clearly as follows:

> *Open access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO 2002: 7)*

This paper will focus on some issues of ODL and the extent to which these issues could determine implementation policies in a small country like Brunei Darussalam.

In Brunei, given the entrenched nature of the traditional conventional system of instruction, and the familiarity of old established norms, it is easy to understand the resistance and reservations held by certain groups of people, the so-called product of a conventional system. Indeed, since majority of policy-makers in Brunei are the product of the conventional traditional system, it is more than likely that ODL will be discussed thoroughly before it can reasonably be regarded as acceptable.

However, discussion concerning this, according to *Schon (1971, p.95)*, is more nearly a battle than a communication, which can be explained as a consequence to the threat to the existing order of educational delivery.

Why there has been an increased interest in ODL?

The success and rapid development in ODL achieved at regional and international level have been very inspiring and it is like a force to be reckoned with. In addition, having to face with a number of phenomena consistent with its effort to cater for constant human resource and manpower requirements, ODL seems to be an ideal alternative and worthy of consideration for implementation. The phenomenon mentioned includes the following:

1. Records show that the number of students eligible for tertiary studies is increasing annually. Since demand exceeds supply, therefore, places for study at local institutions are becoming limited, and consequently, entry onto local tertiary institutions is rather competitive and admission requirement is getting higher and tougher to fulfill.

2. As a major employer employing about 60% of the workforce in Brunei, and in order to continuously fulfill constant human resource development requirements, the government may wish to opt for a new strategy such as this method of delivery, so as to avoid 'vacuuming' within its workforce if training and skills delivery have to be implemented conventionally. In addition, the perceived benefit of ODL capable of providing such requirements at a faster rate would certainly be worth exploring.

3. In the present context of ever changing global economy, coupled with the explosion of knowledge, advances in technologies particularly in information and communication technology, the need to constantly update oneself to acquire various skills and new knowledge is indeed a necessity if one is to participate fully in society and

economy. In this respect, the flexible nature of ODL becomes an attractive option in fulfilling such needs.

4. Since Brunei has established a well-developed ICT network, therefore, this facilitates various government ICT based projects such as e-government, e-education, e-learning, e-library, therefore, there is certain readiness should ODL be implemented.

5. In relation to the well-developed ICT network mentioned above, the use of English language widely in its system of education provides a wider choice for Bruneian towards ODL courses that are available in the international market. Indeed, it is undeniable that students who can speak English will have the privilege to access more educational resources, quality education and more options particularly in the context of ODL courses.

6. Consistent with the Ministry of Education's mission to 'provide holistic education to achieve fullest potential for all', and in line with strategic goals laid out which among others include: provide more choice of education; develop life-long learning skills; including, prepare students with valuable and marketable skills, all these aspects blend in towards the use of ODL as one of the ways of achieving those goals.

B. Consideration Pertaining to Policy and Regulation of ODL

Based on records, there has been increasing number of private institutions and training agencies providing various courses through ODL method, through special arrangements with foreign institutions of higher learning, professional bodies and training agencies. The way at which ODL is operating, is mostly by utilizing a combination of methods between face-to-face and individualized learning using internet and various multimedia technologies.

The local agencies normally provide services such as registration and administrative roles; provide various educational infrastructure facilities including computer and internet access; arrangements for examination and assessment requirement; and, occasional visiting lecturers. For master degree courses, students are required to undertake some residential studies at the main university campus normally in the final or last se-mester/term. Most courses offered are in the field of business administration, professional accounting, law, information and computer studies including some academic subjects such as economic and sciences ranging from degree courses level, professional qualifications, as well as the basic skills such as courses in International Computer Driving License.

Although the courses offered aimed primarily for working adults, records also show that students and the unemployed are also doing courses under ODL method mainly for the purposes of acquiring new skills and knowledge, and indeed for fulfilling personal pursuit and enrichment.

The Role of the Brunei Darussalam National Accreditation Council

In view of the increasing number of ODL courses run privately by various private organizations, institutions and training agencies, and in order to ensure that matters relating to quality assurance requirements are fulfilled, the government through the Brunei Darussalam National Accreditation Council (BDNAC) is charged with the responsibility to oversee this matter. In addition, it has to focus on the needs for securing consumer protection for users.

While it is acknowledged that foreign universities, training agencies and awarding bodies offering courses through ODL in Brunei Darussalam could assist in fulfilling the diverse human resource needs of Brunei Darussalam, it is also important to ensure that the quality of courses provided meet quality assurance requirements set by the BDNAC, a sole national accrediting agency in the country. In this respect, since ODL is an imported educational product, BDNAC has to act accordingly, as a consumer of the product rather than a recipient of a public good.

For that matter, whatever benchmark pertaining to quality and standard in relation to accreditation and recognition of ODL courses and qualifications set forth by BDNAC, it has to be accepted that 'customer is always right' and that the quality standard as set by the BDNAC fits the purpose in the context of Brunei Darussalam. This is consistent with what Harvey and Green mentioned (*1993, p.10*) that 'one definition of quality often used is 'fitness for stated purpose'.

In essence, the quality of a course in any distance learning study method must meet criteria set or expected by various stakeholders; course specialists, employers, institutions of higher learning, external assessors, professional bodies, accreditation or validation agencies and students themselves. It is not simply about what providers claim for the standard and quality of their courses.

The major concerns of all these stakeholders may well differ from each other (*Calder, 1994, p.108*). They will cover academic, pedagogical and vocational issues as well as the learning experiences as a whole. For example, course designers will be concerned principally about the teaching effectiveness of the course. Employers will be more concerned with the output from the course: the skills, knowledge and the personal qualities students acquire.

According to Robinson (*1994, p.4*), the quality of distance learning course is normally judged partly on the following:

- its completion, drop-out and pass rates;
- the submission rate of assignments by students;
- the standard of the materials (in terms of clarity);
- consistency of standards across different parts of the course;
- the acceptance of the course by an accrediting body;
- its validation by an external assessors;
- peer review (course developers or subject specialists);
- the kind of learning resulting from study of the course;

- the assessment design;
- how far learning objectives are met;
- accessibility of support and guidance for students;
- the responsiveness of the institution to students' needs; and
- the tutors' helpfulness to the learning process.

What is of primary interest with regard to the central question in this matter is how and what aspects are considered in the accreditation of ODL. What criteria are used in the accreditation and recognition of ODL qualifications and courses. In Brunei Darussalam, it is worth noting that courses or qualifications are assessed on various aspects including entry requirements, contents, duration and recognition by professional bodies and other accrediting agencies. At present, ODL courses are assessed on a similar basis as conventional full-time courses. Questions may be raised as to whether or not ODL should be considered separately, with specific assessment criteria for Distance Education courses being formulated.

In relation to the above, quality and accreditation are at the heart of much of the debate concerning ODL. Knight (2002: 13) added that the importance of frame-works for licensing, accreditation, qualification recognition and quality assurance are important for all countries whether they are importing or exporting educational services.

Accreditation and benchmark of quality are indeed interconnected. However, accreditation is purposeful in a number of ways. Professionals seek accreditation in order to insure their livelihood by protecting themselves from inadequately trained competitors.

Prospective students seek assurance of quality in colleges and universities. Government officials, employers and corporation officers, on the other hand, require confirmation of at least the minimum competence of institutions, while the public and the institutions themselves need protection from fraud and deception. A society places great dependence on lists of accredited institutions and courses. In general, accreditation is a method employed in order to determine quality, and it is a form of quality control.

In order to achieve the perceived quality in ODL offered in Brunei, the special committee of BDNAC has indicated some features for consideration if ODL is accepted, and these among others include the following:

1. In the absence of recognition and aspects of quality assurance in any ODL courses, the perceived potential advantages of ODL such as access, equity including quality claimed are meaningless. Therefore, it is important that the institutions and their courses must first be accredited by the government of the country of origin and/or by any accrediting agencies recognized by the government.

   As for courses in professional fields such as accountancy, engineering, law, architecture and pharmacy, they have to be accorded with accreditation by professional bodies in the fields concerned, and that the qualifications must be accepted for the purpose of professional registration and practice.

2. ODL courses conducted must be through a combination of both face-to-face and distance learning using multimedia technology. In addition, its implementation has to be based on collaborative partnership arrangements between foreign providers and the local public or private agencies. Local partner will provide or act as a study centre responsible to provide the following services:

- Provide a place for individual study in appropriate environment and at appropriate times.
- Library facilities including e-library.
- Facilities for taking test, examination and various forms of assessment.
- Information centre (in administrative, management, record keeping etc) and provide guidance to the general public.
- Access to technology.
- Acts as a meeting point enabling students to meet with ODL institutions' lecturer, administrator and also enabling students to meet fellow students in the same and/or different course.

C. Funding of ODL

Since ODL in Brunei Darussalam is still at its preliminary planning stages, government funding in this mode of education system has not been considered. In this respect, if ODL has proven to be an effective and capable method of assisting Brunei to achieve its education and training needs, then government investment in this matter became feasible.

At this point, ideas have been mooted among policy-makers that the following aspects could be considered for implementation:

1. Students and government personnel could be considered for either full or partial scholarship awards to study through ODL should they fulfill the criteria set by various government scholarship agencies.

2. Private local education providers in ODL maybe given some form of government incentives for instance by providing financial assistance, facilitates in acquiring physical educational infrastructure, including land tenure, etc.

3. Government institutions of higher learning will be encouraged to promote collaboration with foreign universities or colleges to run courses through ODL. Collaboration and coordination would include research work or project in the areas of curriculum, technology provision, assessment and cost.

D. Conclusion

Although ODL has been widely accepted as an additional method of education delivery, and that it offers benefit in terms of access, equity and flexibility, Brunei Darussalam continues to observe and evaluate how other countries benefit from this.

In addition, issues relating to transnational education, internationalization of education, including various problems inherent within such a system for example fear towards foreign exploitation and domination should be taken into consideration. In essence, the success of ODL in other countries cannot simply be assumed directly applicable to Brunei Darussalam since the context and settings are likely to lack suitability and relevance.

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