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MANAGING QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS IN MALAYSIA

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Summary

This paper articulates the quality assurance efforts taken by one of the leading distance learning institutions in Malaysia. Quality is an underpinning pre-requisite in offering distance learning programs in Malaysia. A low quality distance learning program will never maintain it sustainability in a local educational industry. To fulfill the pre-requisite, MARA University of Technology as one of the leading distance learning institutions in Malaysia has adopted effective measures in assuring quality in its distance learning programs in many important aspects such as learning facilitators, course content, physical and IT infrastructure, teaching, learning experience, assessment and evaluation, learning materials and learners support. This paper also discusses the issues and challenges in assuring quality in the distance learning programs.

Introduction

Malaysia is one of the rapid growing countries in the world which education is one of its major focuses in developing quality human capital. For example, in 2008 the government had allocated 42 billion Malaysian Ringgit (Hero Ventures Sdn. Bhd, 2009). Such amount really reflects the government efforts in developing quality human capital as one of the measures in achieving industrialized country in the year 2020. Distance education is one of important modes of learning which is significantly plays an important role in providing learning opportunities to those who cannot quit their job but highly motivated to further their education.

UiTM (MARA University of Technology) as the largest university in Malaysia has been offering distance education programs for more than a decade to the Bumiputera students (indigenous group) in order to produce more professional Bumiputeras. Being one of the best universities in the country, the aspect of quality always becomes priority before offering any programs to the Bumiputera students. This to guarantee the programs offered are recognized by the government, Malaysian Qualification Agency, Employers, and meeting the customers' expectation. What more with the presence of many competitors such as Malaysian Open University, Wawasan Open University and many other foreign universities which are offering distance programs. To ensure the quality of the distance education programs Distance Education Centre has taken numerous actions in many aspects of it operations which based on UiTM (Universiti Teknologi MARA) Balancing Q-Q 5Es Model as shown in Exhibit 1. The model has been used as a basis for the strategic plan of the university (2006 to 2010) in delivering quality graduates for the human capital of the nation.

UiTM Balancing Q-Q 5E's Model

Exhibit 1: UiTM Balancing Q-Q 5E's Model
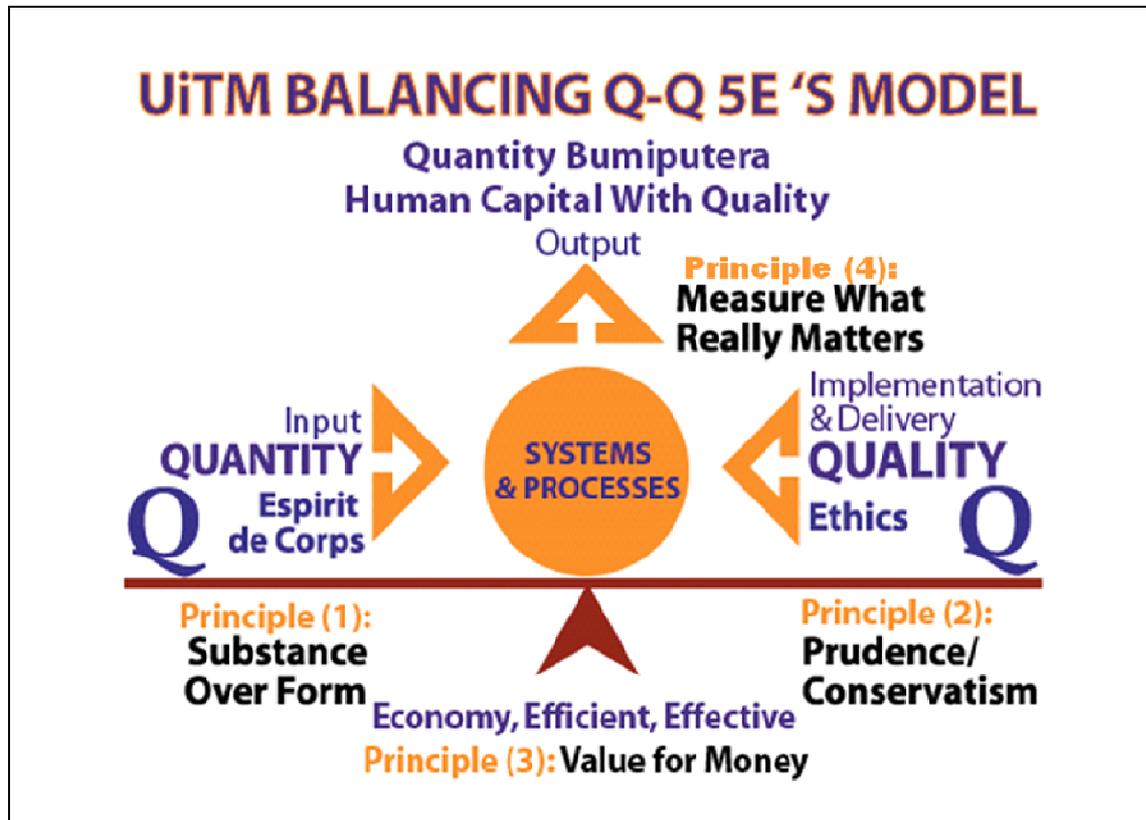
The Model promotes four (4) main principles that balanced one another. The first Q represents quantity, whereas the second Q represents quality and being pivoted in the centre reflecting the balancing effect between the two Qs. This balancing effect is supported by three principles, i.e., substance over form, prudence/conservatism and value for money. Within these principles are the 5Es-Esprit de Corps, Economic, Efficiency, Effectiveness and Ethic. The fourth principle is Measure What Matters to signify the importance of performance measurement in guiding the university charting its transformation roadmap.

Managing Quality Assurance

In promoting the quality of distance learners (substance), the Distance Education Centre practices an equal opportunity among the haves and the haves not when it comes to student's intake. A wide selection of programs is offered to cater as many potential students as possible. As of now 24 programs are offered that ranging from diploma level to masters degree. However, a well tested procedure is referred to ensure quality students are enrolled in field matching their capabilities. New applicants have to meet the minimum entry requirements as the fulltime students. However those who have not met the minimum requirements could compensate it with related working experience which subjected to selection committees' approval. The selection process is carried out ethically by adhering to predetermined policies and procedures.

Meanwhile the Distance Education Centre is also taking steps in assuring quality by promoting the ISO 9001:2000 guideline in its management systems and making sure its entire programs are accredited under the Malaysian Qualification Agency, a national body responsible for quality assurance in tertiary education.

Meanwhile, in maintaining the balance between the quantity and quality, there is a factor of cost that comes into play. Since UiTM is governed under the Ministry of Higher Education, the budget to run the university and to support the development project all comes from the public fund. The third principle is promoted to ensure the amount of budget allocated is well spent in the sense that it takes into account the concept of Value for Money (economy, efficient, effective). All the relevant parties are equipped with appropriate policy and guiding rules & procedures in ensuring a good procurement practice.

Good delivery systems that support teaching and learning is maintained in every aspects such as curriculum development, support services, facilitators, learning centers, online class, course registration, continuous assessment and examination, IT infrastructure, Monitoring of the Online Interaction and seminar and handling students' complaint.

Curriculum Development
The curriculums are designed by panel of experts in one particular discipline such as subject matter experts, practitioners, representative from industries, and regulatory bodies. This is to ensure the curriculums fulfill the need of the industries, learners, government, regulators and other stakeholders. As a result many of the programs receive wide recognition at national and international level.

Support Services,
The UiTM distance education team constantly upgrades support services. It includes Online Counseling, communication via Fax, telephone and e-mail and administrative support. Counseling is important for distance learners, as they are always not on campus. Therefore they need administrative and academic support that they can rely and call in times of need. Overall, there are 15 Program Coordinators in Shah Alam, one Program Coordinator in each learning center. Program Coordinators are responsible in advising learners in academic matters, preparing schedules, and determining the learning facilitators and resource persons for each on-line subject. In addition to that, Distance Education Centre also appointed a coordinator specifically to handle all matters regarding student affairs such as organizing motivational courses and talks for adult learners, sports and study skills workshops.

Competent Facilitators (Seminar Facilitators and Learning Facilitator),
The quality of facilitators has always been enhanced from time to time by providing relevant training programs. Latest ideas and technology is very important in helping the Learning facilitator (LF) to interacts, assist and guide the learners in reading SIM (Self Instructional Material) and web-based materials on the web. They will initiate discussion among learners, and answer questions related to the subject. They will assist learners in providing learning skills such as how to answer questions and how to do assignments and projects. All online facilitators are required to log in to the web everyday to answer questions from learners.

Similarly to Seminar Facilitators (SF) who conducts the face-to face seminar. They are also trained to conduct effective seminar (face to face meeting) that responsible to distribute, collect and grade assignments or projects provided by SFs. They are also responsible to conduct, collect and grade tests and exams and also provide and solicit feedback to /from RPs, LFs, SIM writers and managers.

Learning Center
In creating high accessibility to education, face to face meeting are conducted at 9 UiTM campuses which located in almost every state in Malaysia. These study centers provide

support services to the learners. Learner need not travel to the main campus (Shah Alam, Selangor) for face-to-face seminars or for registration purpose or for counseling. They can go to the nearest study center, which is convenient to their workplace. However not all the study centers offer all programs. There are some programs which are only being offered in Shah Alam. The students from other states still have to travel to Shah Alam.

Online discussion and Forum,
The web is used for communication and interaction purposes. The electronic class consists of Chat, e-mail and forum. Learners are able to discuss and interact using these technologies.

The proper utilization of the web as a communication tool alleviates the need for face-to-face meetings in the confines of a traditional classroom. This medium can be used "as a classroom in virtual space and unbounded by time or geographical location." With a little imagination and innovation, a teacher can transform the web "classroom" into a lively and intellectually stimulating environment conducive for learning.

Online Course Registration
A reliable online course registration is constructed to help the students who are scattered every where in Malaysia to register every semester. They are also allowed to drop and add within a given period of time and they also can validate the registration to avoid any mistake.

Continuous Assessment and Final Examination
The assessment and examination are strictly based on the faculty requirements in ensuring quality. However, the facilitators may conduct the continuous assessments according to their suitability. Most facilitators conduct the continuous assessment live in seminar rooms. Since the programs belong to the faculty, the students have to take the same exam as the on campus students do to ensure the quality. The final exam is held at the end of every semester.

The IT Infrastructure
An effective Learning Management System (LMS) which was developed by UiTM is able to serve as a reliable flat form where the facilitators can communicate with their students by using any of the following interactions channels:

- FORUM (Asynchronous) for one-to-many or for many-to-many discussions. This type of channel has the potential to develop a student's thinking as well as promote writing skills. The FORUM can be used at three levels:
  - Public Level, where ALL users are able to view and participate.
  - Group level, where access can be determined by lecturers.
  - Course level, for ALL users enrolled in a certain course/subject.
- E-MAIL, for one-to-one interaction
  CHAT (Synchronous), for one-to-many or for many-to-many, but reduces flexibility in terms of time.

Monitoring of the Online Interaction and seminar
The online interaction is always being monitored by the program coordinators by checking the statistics of participation or interaction provided by the LMS. A program coordinator is able to identify the duration of interaction of a learning facilitator on the web. Reminders are always being given to those who fail to interact according to the standard requirement which is within 48 hours.

The students' feedback which is obtained from seminar facilitators evaluation and online interaction is always being used as an effective mechanism to ensure the quality of teaching of the seminar facilitators. Advises and reminders are always being given to the problematic seminar facilitators.

Handling Students' Complaint
One of the characteristics of adult learners is they come back to school with very high expectation. They aspect everything is taught by the lecturers. Thus, anything they feel not up to their expectation will be voice out in the group or public forum. These forums have become the official channels for the students to complaint and for the management to receive feedback from the students besides suggestion box, email and letters.

And finally the road map of the Distance Education Centre in managing quality of distance programs is well guarded by a performance management systems that pinpoint only the relevant key performance indicators and is tracked twice yearly according to the regular cycle of a semester system. The achievement of the identified key performance indicators are reported to be viewed by management, for them to take relevant action in ensuring the quality graduates will materialised. The performance management of the university takes the systemic approach that it encompasses the whole system from input, process and output.

Issues and Challenges

There are several issues and challenges have emerged in managing quality as follows:

1. Cooperation of academic and administrative staff
Not everyone understands and supports the idea of quality assurance. These happened could be due to lack of understanding about the quality assurance or refuse to accept new ideas.

2. Changing technology

As technology changes, Distance Education Centre needs to review its technological status. Upgrading of technology has to be continuous in order to be at the leading edge all the time.

3. Competition with other providers of education

UiTM has to face with stiffer competition as all the eleven (11) public universities have collaborated to form an open university claiming to offer programs in the same mode as that of UiTM at almost half the price. There are also a number of private universities working towards offering on-line education.

4. Students' expectation

Adult students come back to school with high expectation. They expect everything is in place perfectly. For example, the students expect everything is to be taught by the seminar facilitators as the fulltime students. This happened due to the misunderstanding of the concept of e-learning program. As a result, they always lodge many complaints on many issues which sometimes are inappropriate.

Conclusion

As one of the leading institution in e-learning program in the country, Distance Education Centre has done a great effort in promoting quality in distance learning programs. A well planned approach which is based on empirical evidences was an essential factor in warranting this success. Today more than 50% students graduated with more than 2.75 CGPA which is at par with the fulltime students. In preparing as a quality agent, an e-learning manager has to equip him or herself with conceptual skill, technical skill and human skill that can help them to promote quality e-learning program that can fulfill the students' needs as well as the society. Understanding the concept of adult learning is another

important factor in managing quality of e-learning program. An e-learning manager has to treat the adult students professionally. They cannot be treated like school children or adolescence. Flexibility has always been one of the important aspects when dealing with them. As a result they will be motivated to learn and sustain in their studies

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