

# **Implementing Flexible Learning Mode in Health Science Programmes - A Malaysian Perspective: MARA University of Technology (UiTM) Experience.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the experience of implementing flexible learning mode in health science programmes at the Faculty of Health Sciences, MARA University of Technology, Malaysia. Current technological, medical and health advancements have given rise to the changing needs of the health professions in the country with regards to career development of health professionals, job specifications, entry qualifications into government services, and continuous professional development. Consequently these needs affect the traditional practices in the nature of teaching and learning in health science programmes. There are several issues that consequently propel the implementation of flexibility and innovation in teaching and learning. These issues or trends are discussed under themes, namely; the health profession, students and faculty members.

## **Keywords**

Flexible learning, health sciences, distance education, medical education.

## **Introduction**

Recognising the vital role of technology in education and professional practice, MARA University of Technology (UiTM) has long been encouraging flexibility in teaching and learning modes through the initiatives of its Institute for Educational Development (InED). With its root from: *"A belief that every individual has the ability to attain excellence through the transfer of knowledge and the assimilation of moral values so as to become professional graduates capable of developing knowledge, self, society and the nation"*; UiTM strives to achieve its mission to : *"... enhance the knowledge and expertise of the nation in all fields of study through professional programmes, research work, and community service based on moral values and professional ethics"*.

The development of flexible learning programmes that can magnify the University's reach and improve its productivity and quality of teaching, is in line with one of its objectives which is: *"To provide maximum opportunities to pursue professionally recognised programmes of study in science, industry, technology, business, arts and humanities."*

Technological advances in the medical and health field is tremendous and at an exceptional rate such that life-long learning is a necessity for healthcare professionals. Nevertheless, healthcare professionals are not blessed with the advantage of having plenty of free time or the option to leave their jobs easily to attend face-to-face courses.

As such, the introduction of flexible learning mode programmes is considered a good option for health professionals working in a wide range of areas within healthcare, wishing to retain their role with an increased knowledge and skill level. In June 2006,

the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS), with the cooperation of the Institute for Educational Development (InED), MARA University of Technology started the first flexible learning programmes for health professionals in the country; the Bachelor in Medical Imaging (Hons.) and the Bachelor in Occupational Therapy (Hons.).

With a population that is both growing and aging, the Malaysian Government has given the healthcare sector top priority, and is committed to improving it. Under the Eighth Malaysia Plan, the government plans to provide for the improvement of healthcare with the following main strategies:

- Improving accessibility to affordable and quality healthcare
- Expanding the wellness programme
- Promoting co-ordination and collaboration between private and public health provision
- Increasing the supply of trained and allied health professionals
- Enhancing the research capability of the health sector

The Government has also for some time been aware of the shortage of professionals in the medical and health sector, and has therefore place an emphasis on continuous training of in-service medical and health personnel, to ensure quality care, and cater for the expanding health programmes (Ministry of Health,2006).

In November 2002, the Malaysian government introduced the new Sistem Saraan Malaysia (SSM) promotional scheme and the mandatory assessment of level of competency for all categories of public service employees including health professionals. The main objectives of the SSM scheme are to ensure employee's self development through continuous learning, the use of knowledge and skills to enhance creativity and innovation, creation of learning institution and k- workers and the development of competency based human resource management. (Jaafar,2006)

In 2004, the Ministry of Health (MOH) proposed a model to the Public Service Department (PSD) which integrates Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and career pathway for all categories of its health workers into the SSM scheme. In the same year, the PSD upgraded 6 categories of healthcare personals to the professional scheme, namely the radiographers, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, medical laboratory technologists and the environmental health officers with higher pay schemes and better career pathways.

Dunn, in Howell, 2003, noted that "...the changing nature of the workforce in the Information Age ... [will require] a continuous cycle of retraining and retooling". Howell, 2003 pointed out that to meet the demands for a dynamic workforce, retirement will be delayed until late in life. He also suggested that in such circumstances, "the opportunity for training is becoming one of the most desirable benefits any job can offer," and employers are coming to "view employee training as a good investment". And it is not surprising nowadays that an increasing number of employers are paying for their employees to go back to the universities to stay current with changes.

As such, there is a need for skill upgrading of the existing workforce, enhanced access to relevant education and training. This will result in increased participation in tertiary education and accordingly, a need for an alternative learning mode for the delivery of educational programmes suited to health professionals at different levels. These

programmes should include adapting the new teaching and learning technologies—which transform both the acquisition and sharing of knowledge – to the needs of the health professionals.

Consequently, the needs of the Government and the MOH have particular relevance to the development of flexible learning mode in health sciences programmes at UiTM.

### **Methodology**

The issues presented in this article were drawn from informal face-to-face interviews conducted with 20 students from the Medical Imaging programme and 10 students from the Occupational Therapy programme. All of the students are currently working either as radiographers or occupational therapists in public or private hospitals, and have diploma qualifications in their respected fields.

Three (3) faculty members and two (2) external lecturers who were involved directly in the teaching process were interviewed using open ended questions concerning their experiences with flexible learning. Predominant themes are identified and form the basis of the findings presented. The words of the interviewees are shown in italics.

The interview process, included questions that focused on the following general topic areas:

- Initial motivation for enrolling in the programme
- Learning issues
- Access, administration and support issues
- Career and professional development

### **The Results**

All of the students are currently working either as radiographers or occupational therapists in public or private hospitals, and have diploma qualifications in their respected fields. Predominant themes are identified and form the basis of the findings presented. The words of the interviewees are shown in italics.

#### **The FLP Students**

The main issue that was brought up by most students during the informal interview is time. For them, time is limited due to work and family commitments. As such, proper time management and learning skills are essential for FLP students. There was a general feeling that there is *"too much to read and too little time to do it"*. There was also a suggestion for a pre-enrollment course on time management, writing and reading skills for academic purposes.

Student's use of, and access to, university systems were problem areas the students pointed out. Access difficulties were the common theme but *"it is not so bad after office hours, especially at midnight"*. However, *"the greatest problems are the on-line registration (enrolment) period"*, which affects access to the virtual class and forums.

Having adequate IT support, is essential in any e-learning environment, however, at present this is *"less than satisfactory"*. *"There should be technical support 24-7"* and *"having people available on the phone to help us"* is important. Another aspect was the importance of *"making sure the staff knows enough to help students gain access to the on-line system"* and not *"passing us around from one person to another"*.

Another key issue the university needs to deal with is the examination procedures for students taking examinations at branch campuses. As the courses and numbers increase, it may become unmanageable and may prove unworkable (Gunn, 2002).

It is a bit of a concern that quite a few students still feel that the course "*should have lectures, instead of seminars or tutorials*". However, it is quite a pleasant finding that most of the students find "*working with a computer is not a major challenge*"

### **The Academic Staff**

A major theme that all the academic staff interviewed voiced out was increased workload. Several studies revealed that, depending on the format, distance education can often increase the workload of the academic staff. A web-based course sometimes may require more time and effort compared with a traditional lecture-based course of comparable size, content, and credit. The workload increases with the increase of the number of students (Bates, 2003).

Some academic staff found little "*time to deal with the mountain of paperwork*". Another aspect of workload is the course preparation. Unlike traditional face-to-face classes, distance education classes must be prepared fully in advance "*and there really needs to be a support team, to help us prepare the modules and the study guides, and any academic jobs that come by along the course duration*".

Advising is another aspect of workload which was indicated as a significant issue. Advising students via e-mail and the Internet is particularly "challenging", "*time consuming*" and "*sometimes it doesn't come out the way we want it*". There is the general feeling that they "*have to be available to students outside of office hours*" and "*have to be there all the time*".

However, it is surprising to find out that most of the staff pointed out that the "*compensation for the extra workload is not a major issue*" but the "*quality of the learning*" and "*amount of knowledge gained by the students*" are of their concern.

### **Limitations of the report**

It is important to note that the views expressed in this report are not a representative sample of the views of all faculty staff and students. Although, the views should offer a starting point for further study of the effectiveness of FLP in health science programmes compared to traditional delivery, and other areas of concern such as clinical competency and performance evaluation.

In an attempt to present an overview of how FLP is currently perceived by the students and academic staff interviewed, the participants' narratives have been used freely throughout this report. The following quote sums up a common view among the students, "*This programme gives us the opportunity to further our careers without having to sacrifice our jobs. On top of that it serves to promote ourselves as "true professionals" that can apply our knowledge to real clinical situations.*"

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this report are not uncommon to flexible and distance learning and mixed mode education in other tertiary institutions (Bates, 2003). Medical and health science education is steadily putting emphasis on wider skills sometimes categorised as

professional development, which requires students to be “adaptable to change, to practice quality enhancement, to be able to add to the field of knowledge, to be professional and to be ethical” (UiTM,2006).

It is therefore timely that the flexible learning mode is adopted by the health science programmes to support the Government’s initiatives for the career development of health professionals in the country. The intention of UiTM’s FLP programmes is to offer better educational opportunity and process to the population through approaches such as web-based learning, virtual classes and forums, web based student discussion, notice boards, posting of assignments and timetabling.

Continuation of this approach will enable the development and integration of flexible and mixed mode learning delivery for other science and technology based programmes in the country such as pharmacy, sports medicine and engineering.

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