

STRAIGHT-TALKING WITH PROF AHMAD

By Lilian Kek Siew Yick

PROF AHMAD HASHEM is the General Manager of Technology for OUM as well as the GM for Meteor Technology and Consultancy Sdn Bhd (MTC SB). Armed with a PhD in aeronautics, the 54 year old has been serving at the University for more than six years. The following interview gives us a glimpse into the issue of harnessing technology for the benefit of the OUM community.

Lilian: Please tell us a bit about your work.

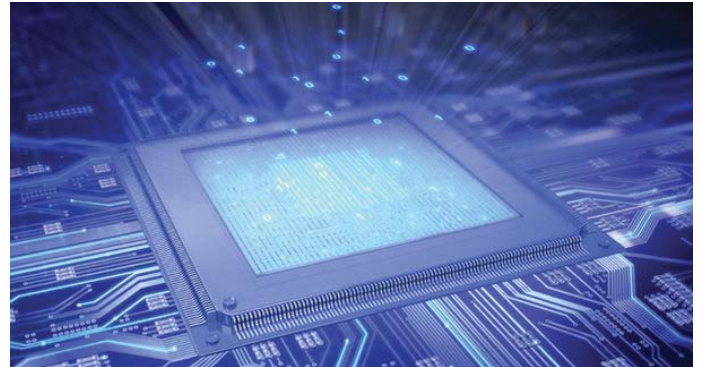
Prof Ahmad: For OUM, I try to ensure that all the required technology is made available. I also chair a small committee to look into current and future trends in e-learning and how best to adapt these to the OUM context. At MTC SB, I manage almost 60 staff. We are an ICT solutions provider, that is, we are a business that provides information systems and consultancy for clients both nationally and internationally.

Lilian: What do you feel is the role of technology in education, generally speaking?

Prof Ahmad: Technology can add extra dimensions to conventional teaching and learning. For example, when a teacher is teaching about Vietnam, the Internet can enable students to visit and see actual live scenes in Vietnam through webcams. Students can also speak to native speakers through web-based meeting or some other applications. Just imagine that! Thus, technology, if used properly can enhance teaching and learning. It must be remembered that technology is a powerful tool and like all powerful tools, requires care during use to ensure that the desired results are obtained.

Lilian: How could technology be used to help in the provision of open and distance learning (ODL) in particular?

Prof Ahmad: Technology can help in the delivery process. The Internet is used for online learning. A compact disc can store a lot of information such as books and videos that can be distributed to students in remote areas with no Internet access. Also, mobile devices such as phones and MP3 players can be leveraged to facilitate mobile learning.



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Lilian: Within the context of OUM, what is the role of technology?

Prof Ahmad: OUM uses technology to manage almost all aspects of its operations – from managing the provision of learning to managing the entire learning process. OUM is a lean organisation, for example, the administration of each faculty is carried out by one dean and four or five executives. Compare this with faculties in conventional universities where the dean will have at least 20 administrative staff to help him, not counting the heads of the various departments. By being lean, OUM can reduce unnecessary costs and pass on the savings to its students. It has not increased fees since it started operations. Technologies also facilitate transactions and communications between students and OUM. Students can access all relevant information online, make payments through direct bank transfer and submit queries online. Even after normal office hours, students can still access learning contents and conduct discussions with their peers and their tutors. Technology makes learning very flexible.

Lilian: In what ways could tutors use technology in their tutoring activities?

Prof Ahmad: Tutors can use the forum in MyLMS to discuss issues concerning study material with their students. They can set up virtual office hours so that students can communicate via mobile or online avenues such as chat

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and e-mail. Tutors can also use materials available on the Internet to supplement their teaching. Tutors and their students can set up social networks, for example, in DevianART and Facebook. They can share common interests as well as discuss academic matters. There are all sorts of things that can be done such as setting up blogs that are relevant to students, posting teaching videos on YouTube and so on.

Lilian: *What could tutors advise new learners to do in order to become familiarised with the use of technology in their learning?*

Prof Ahmad: Do not be afraid of technology. Get familiar with a small portion first. Be comfortable and then increase the use of technology. Treat technology as a tool, as you would a pen or a calculator. It may take a bit of time to get familiarised but be rest assured that almost everybody can use technology.

Lilian: *We have heard that the University might use an anti-plagiarism software called Turnitin in the future. Could you tell us a bit about it?*

Prof Ahmad: Turnitin is a proprietary software that compares essays and assignments to its own database of essays, the Internet as well as several subscription databases. It produces a report on the extent of similarity between the submitted work and work from other sources. Use of this and other similar software is not meant to be punitive. Rather, it is to encourage proper learning. Students can submit their essays and get a report of the extent of similarity as a result of the comparison. From this report, students can improve on their work so that their essays are entirely original. Currently, we are using Turnitin to verify the originality of our modules. We have used similar software on student assignments as part of a pilot project. At the moment, we are studying the implications of using this software.

Lilian: *How would this software benefit OUM, its tutors and its learners?*

Prof Ahmad: As I mentioned before, the use of this and similar software is not to punish but to encourage proper and ethical use of reference materials. Learners benefit from knowing that their efforts to produce original work are being recognised. Tutors no longer need to harbour any doubts on learners' submitted works and can now focus fully on evaluating the quality of work. OUM always strives to ensure high-quality education so any initiative that can ensure quality is of benefit to OUM.

Lilian: *Overall, what challenges do you feel might arise or have arisen in using technology in ODL education?*

Prof Ahmad: The age of OUM students span the range from a bit older than 17 to a bit younger than 80. We are an institution that can have a grandfather, a father and a son as registered students all at the same time! This is a big challenge for us. The younger ones are mostly technology savvy and expect a lot of technological input in their learning. Those at the other end of the age range, however, may require quite a bit of gentle persuasion to be tech-enabled. There is also the digital divide between urban and less urban students to contend with. While most urban learners can easily avail themselves of whatever technology that is required, their less urban counterparts may have to settle for less cutting-edge technology or sometimes none at all. The stability and availability of Internet connections in many areas throughout Malaysia also leaves a lot to be desired. It is difficult to provide online learning if the quality and availability of the Internet connection cannot be guaranteed.

Lilian: *How could these challenges be overcome?*

Prof Ahmad: OUM must cater to the needs of all our students. So, we must have specially designed offerings to suit the majority of capabilities. We must provide print-based material, media-rich contents, podcasts, videos, mobile contents and so on. We are doing many of these now. Also, it is important that all our academic staff know and use the relevant technologies so that they can understand the ever-changing scenario of learning technology. They must leverage on the very same tools that are popular among students. We hope the government and the private sector would speed up the deployment of nationwide broadband and that the cost of technology can be made affordable through subsidies, tax reductions, etc. Only by being affordable to the masses can technology be ubiquitous and bring the most benefit to the nation.

Lilian: *How do you envision the use of technology at OUM in the future?*

Prof Ahmad: The technologies being used at OUM always evolve to suit requirements. We never stop reinventing ourselves. For learning, we are looking at Web 2.0 and e-learning 2.0. We will also leverage more on open educational resources as well as participate more in web communities. We are dabbling with the 3D landscape of applications such as Second Life to use in certain specialised learning contexts. In addition, we are continually exploring the new universe and from where we are now, the future certainly looks exciting.

Lilian: *Thank you for your answers, Prof Ahmad.*

Prof Ahmad: Welcome.