

# ZOOMING IN WITH DR ZAINAL

Interview by Harvinder Kaur Dharam Singh

ASSOC PROF DR ZAINAL ABIDIN AHMAD obtained his PhD in Counselling Psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States. He worked as an academician at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for 26 years before serving OUM for the past eight years. Currently, he is a consultant at the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. He can be reached at zainalabidin@oum.edu.my.

**Harvinder:** You have vast experience teaching in public universities before joining OUM. Could you tell us what sets our learners apart from public university students?

**Dr Zainal:** There is a difference between students of public institutions of learning and OUM in terms of their levels of academic preparedness, aspirations and motivation. Indeed, even the nature of their respective challenges is different.

Most OUM students are mature working adults who voluntarily decided to pursue higher academic qualifications to improve their work opportunities. The rest are those who have been directed by their employers to upgrade their qualifications in specific areas to fill in projected vacancies. We are also seeing a trend whereby more senior citizens who missed going to college in their younger days are taking up the challenge to study for a degree for personal satisfaction. In fact, OUM is the first educational institution to prepare Malaysians for lifelong learning.

**Harvinder:** Based on your experience in dealing directly with learners at the Counselling Unit and Learner Services Centre, could you tell us what are OUM learners' learning styles and problems?

**Dr Zainal:** It is difficult to detect or categorise what learning styles students have when they seek assistance at the Counselling Unit or Learner Services Centre. Everyone has a way of learning which works best for them. Most students have one style which is predominant but can accommodate other styles as well. But mostly, they come with study problems which have led to failure in their examinations. The most common problems are:



1. Difficulty in understanding modules in English
2. Poor study habits
3. Poor time management
4. Heavy workload
5. Inadequate prior learning in the subject matter chosen

When one has a poor grasp of English, one is handicapped in comprehending an entire module. Reading the module becomes an unbearable chore. No matter how helpful a tutor tries to be in facilitating a class discussion based on the module, the student will still not be able to understand the concepts being addressed, let alone participate in the discussion.

On the other hand, students who scored a four-flat CGPA reported that they read and understood their modules from cover to cover before sitting for examinations. In fact, some even said, "I'll never sit for my examinations until and unless I have read my modules at least three times."

Another characteristic of the successful students is that they often study in groups. By studying in small groups of two to five, they get to discuss the subject matter more realistically and meaningfully. I suspect even those who had problems in understanding modules in English would benefit. Those who are highly motivated will try this technique. Furthermore, the dynamics of the group will work for them because of the comradeship.

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**Harvinder:** Could you tell us what learners look for in their tutors?

**Dr Zainal:** They look for –

1. Patience and Understanding – Basically, all our students want to gain knowledge and pass all their examinations so that they may earn their degrees and diplomas.

It follows then that they would like tutors who could help them undergo their programmes meaningfully. As tutors, we cannot assume that all students have the same rate of understanding. We must give many examples when we see signs of non-comprehension in their faces.

2. Respect – Adult students could be fun to teach because they have a lot of work experience. They also have many preconceived ideas about things not related to their studies but are shared by their circle of friends.

When students’ responses to academic questions are not accepted by their tutors, the students should not be ridiculed. Some students have confided that there are tutors who show disrespect towards adult students.

3. Sincere in Helping – Students look for tutors who seem sincerely helpful and friendly. This does not mean the tutors are pushovers. Rather, it means they communicate to the students their desire to see their students succeed.

They could sense which part of a subject matter needs to be elaborated on and would spend time to explain it to the students patiently. This of course requires the tutors to be experts in the subjects they teach and to know the areas the students find difficult to understand.

**Harvinder:** In what aspect do you see room for improvement among our tutors?

**Dr Zainal:** Most of our tutors come from various public and private institutions of higher learning and have proper qualifications and experience. But many of them use the lecture mode. They conduct lectures from the beginning to the end of a tutorial. They need to realise that the module is the “lecture” and tutors need to elaborate on the difficult portions of the “lecture.” From my tutoring experience, I found the online discussion forums extremely helpful. I would post in the forum the topics and difficult concepts to be discussed during the next tutorial. The students would then prepare before coming to class. This usually triggers a lively discussion in class and enhances understanding.

**Harvinder:** What advice would you like to share with our tutors?

**Dr Zainal:** My advice to our tutors would be to respect our students, whether young or old, not because they pay us, but because they are humans and they have feelings, responsibilities, shortcomings and workloads. Many of them have to divide time between family and studies.

Tutors need to have the patience to help students understand a subject matter as clearly as possible. In the process, we hope to humanise the classroom without making our students feel silly.

Our tutors also should be sincere in wanting our students to succeed in their studies. It is a big decision for our students to change course from being totally full-time breadwinners and family persons to being students again. Empathising with that would make us realise that a little bit of tutoring help could change the lives of many aspiring adults. 