



SEPTEMBER 2010/ISSUE

30

## LEARNER ATTRITION & RETENTION

### WHAT TUTORS CAN DO TO CARE FOR LEARNERS

ODL learners are known to be resilient, even if they are not always entirely aware of it! They juggle heavy work and family responsibilities with their studies around the clock and for several years at a stretch before hopefully reaching the finish line to graduate. At times, however, some of these learners would hit a rough patch along the way, disrupting their studies. Without their tutors' care and support, they might defer their studies for a semester or more, or eventually lose interest in completing their studies. Or they might just drop out at the first sign of academic challenge, not realizing that they are more capable and resilient than they think. Learner attrition ultimately disadvantages the learners themselves, who won't get to see their potential realised, as well as to the nation in terms of its loss of enhanced human capital. This issue of TCX examines learner attrition and what tutors can do to care for learners and help them stay on the right track.

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## ABOUT TCX

TCX (Tutor Connexions) is a non-profit OUM e-newsletter that provides a dedicated link between the University and its tutors. It serves as a channel for news and updates on tutor-related events and as a platform for the sharing of views, experiences and tips on best practices in university teaching and learning.

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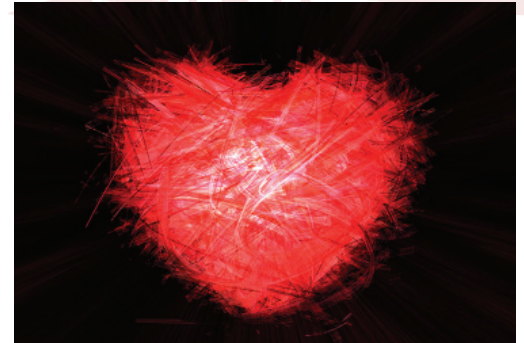
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## EDITOR'S NOTE

To all existing and new tutors, OUM welcomes you (back) on board for the new September 2010 semester. As always, the beginning of a new semester never lacks excitement, with tutorials to prepare, new learners to meet and guide, and a whole range of other teaching-learning activities to carry out.

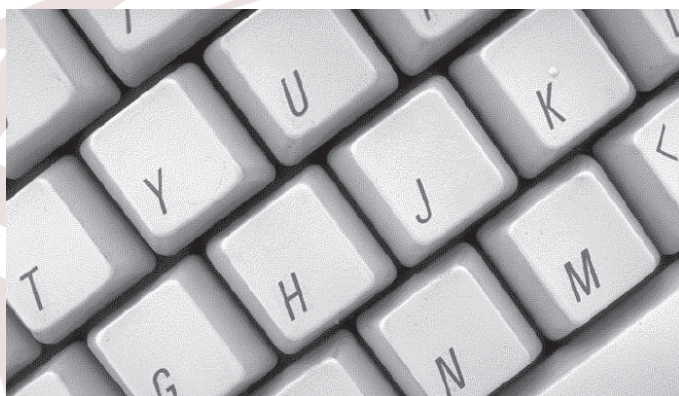


Just in time for the new semester, TCX30 aim to take all tutors through an examination of a key area of concern for OUM: learner attrition and retention. No doubt, as Prof Latifah Abdol Latif notes in this issue's From the Dean's Office, the openness of OUM as an online and distance learning (ODL) institution in itself inevitably invites attrition. Learner attrition is in fact a common pattern in all ODL institutions across the world. Yet, at the same time, the consensus is that there is much that the institution, encompassing internal and external staff, including tutors, can do to care for learners by guiding them towards the finish line.

The features in TCX30 take multiple perspectives on the issue at hand. There is obviously more to be said, so do write in to us to let us know what you think. We hope that all tutors will benefit from the views and insights shared by the contributors, and that these will be put into practice over the semesters.

Best

Dr David CL Lim  
Chief Editor



### Fast-Track PhD Programmes?

Nowadays, we hear our Prime Minister emphasising the importance of education, especially pre-school education and lifelong learning. To establish a highly educated society focusing on human capital, OUM should consider offering more opportunities for lecturers to further their studies by, for instance, coming up with an MOU with Institut Pendidikan Guru (IPG). Maybe an arrangement could be made to open up centres in IPGs during weekends to enable interested lecturers to study for their PhDs.

OUM should also think out of the box to come up with schemes which would appeal to tutors. Perhaps OUM could offer tutors who have served for more than five years the opportunity to enrol in a fast-track PhD programme to be completed within two-and-a-half to three years. Would this be possible?

*Yeoh Siok Tee*  
*Batu Pahat Learning Centre*

Dear Mr Yeoh,

*You would be pleased to know that OUM already has a long established relationship with Kementerian Pelajaran, mainly BPG and IPG. The arrangement thus far covers specific programmes for undergraduate in-service teachers. Your suggestion that OUM provides opportunities for interested lecturers to pursue postgraduate studies is most welcome and very encouraging indeed. OUM has pitched the idea to the Kementerian but no agreements have been reached yet. Be assured, nevertheless, that the matter is being discussed.*

*On fast-track PhD programmes, it is worth noting that PhD programmes are normally research intensive and that the length of time required to complete a PhD research depends very much on the nature of the research and*

*the pace at which learners are able to work. Nonetheless, OUM is continuously coming up with new structures for graduate programmes to best assist learners in a way that does not compromise on quality. OUM is always open to new ideas and your suggestion for a fast track PhD is certainly appreciated.*

*Prof Dr Shaari Abd Hamid*  
*Deputy Vice President,*  
*Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA)*

### Taking Plagiarism Seriously

I refer to the article Copying and Its After-Effects: Notes from the Field featured in TCX28.

I totally understand the writer's situation. I have advised learners not to plagiarise. I have even taught them the proper way to cite sources and write the bibliography, even if this is not one of my subjects.

Yet, there are those who still fail to understand or perhaps pretend not to understand the concept of plagiarism. I suggest that tutors should be strict when marking assignments, paying close attention to whether references and citations are done according to the recommended APA style.

Perhaps some learners take for granted the seriousness of this matter and do not appreciate the implications of their actions. At the end of the day, if their thesis, project report or assignment is found to be plagiarised, then there should be dire consequences. If they have graduated, their degrees may have to be withdrawn. If they have not graduated, they should be penalised. This should be impressed upon all learners. Thank you.

*Hanizah Abdul Bahar*  
*Perak Learning Centre*

Dear Hanizah,

*Bravo for doing your part in tackling the issue of plagiarism on the ground level. If everyone does his or her bit, just like what you have done, I believe the problem will be checked.*

*You probably will have noticed that the nature of the tasks for our assignments has changed lately. We have introduced, for many courses, authentic assignments, which entail the use of rubrics in communicating our expectations to*

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learners as well as using the said rubrics in grading. We hope that this will have a positive effect in reducing cases of plagiarism. At the same time, we have also introduced online submissions and centralized grading, thus enabling us to run similarity checks to detect copying and collusion in assignment writing. Penalties will also be imposed on those found to have violated the University's stringent plagiarism rules and regulations.

*Prof Dr Shaari Abd Hamid  
Deputy Vice President,*

*Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA)*

### **Quizzes to Circumvent Plagiarism**

I agree with Prof Mansor Fadzil's statement in TCX28 that OUM should build "personal integrity" among the learners.

Some of the learners actually "outsource" their assignments which can be very difficult to detect. Therefore, the assignment is not a good form of assessment in this case. I think quizzes are better because they will ensure learners' attendance in class. This, of course, requires the tutors to prepare the quizzes beforehand.

*Ling Hau Ching  
Sibu Learning Centre*

*Dear Hau Ching,*

*Thanks for your concern and suggestions to address the problem associated with the use of the assignment as a tool of assessment.*

*As you may have noticed, starting from the May 2010 semester, a number of steps have been put in place to reduce the malpractices associated with assignments. First, we have done away with assignments for a number of courses. Assignments would only be continued for higher level courses, whose learning outcomes call for them to be used in order to bring learners to higher level of learning.*

*Second, the nature of the assignment questions posed has changed from highly specific questions looking for specific answers to more authentic questions. In many cases, this entails the use of rubrics as a mean of conveying to learners the SMEs' expectations as well as the standards for grading.*

*Third, in a majority of cases, assignments are to be submitted online and are centrally graded by qualified and experienced academics. The assignments are subjected to similarity checks and the degree of overlaps between assignments are determined. Those with a significant degree of overlaps will be reviewed by the faculty for further action.*

*We are monitoring the effects of these changes with a keen eye. Hopefully we will be able to reduce malpractices among learners and enable them to acquire a rewarding learning experience instead.*

*As for quizzes, they may be good in the conventional setting where a lecturer or tutor has the sole responsibility of managing his or her relatively small class. It is, however, quite a problem to manage in the case of distributed learning such as ours. We had quizzes as a component of assessment in our early years. We had to abandon them because of the variable manner in which they were dispensed.*

*Prof Dr Shaari Abd Hamid  
Deputy Vice President,  
Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA)*

### **Psychometric Profiling and Certification for OUM Tutors**

In TCX27, Assoc Prof Dr Santhi Raghavan, then the director of the Centre for Tutor Management and Development (CTMD), mooted the idea of introducing Psychometric Profiling and Certification for Open and Distance Learning Tutors (CODLT) as means to screen tutors at OUM. Personally, I believe that both these instruments would be ideal and wish to see them implemented.

Since there is a new change in CTMD management, I wonder whether the new director, Prof Zoraini, will still be implementing these changes? What are the future plans for tutor development in OUM?

*Roziah Uji Razalie  
Sabah Learning Centre*

*Thank you, Roziah. OUM is committed to continually enhancing the quality of our tutors. On the benefits of both Psychometric Profiling and Certification for Open Distant Learning Tutors as ways to screen, train and upgrade the tutors, we couldn't agree with you more. We will look into the idea to see how best to implement it. Meanwhile, do have*

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a look at the feature in this issue of TCX on ITLA, which supersedes CTMD.

Atchuthan a/l Chandu Nair  
Kedah Learning Centre

Prof Dr Shaari Abd Hamid  
Deputy Vice President,  
Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA)

Thank you Atchuthan. Your suggestion will be seriously considered. OUM always welcomes any ideas to help our tutors perform optimally on the job.

Prof Dr Shaari Abd Hamid  
Deputy Vice President,  
Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA)

### Building Better Tutors at OUM

I've been reading TCX for some time and I find the articles interesting and useful for tutors like me. One such article is Jimmy Teo Hui Thian's "10 Steps To Better Tutoring" in TCX27.

However, I believe that 10 steps are far too many and should be reduced to five easy steps. I would also like to propose that these pointers be printed on a small card for OUM tutors to bring and refer to during tutorials.

### TUTOR REMINDER



## IMPORTANT DATES

### Note On Course Assignments

Most course assignments are now to be submitted online for grading. Tutors handling these courses are not required to mark the assignments or input marks into OMES. Assignments which are not entirely text-based will still be graded by learners' respective tutors. These assignments will need to be submitted to tutors by Tutorial 4.

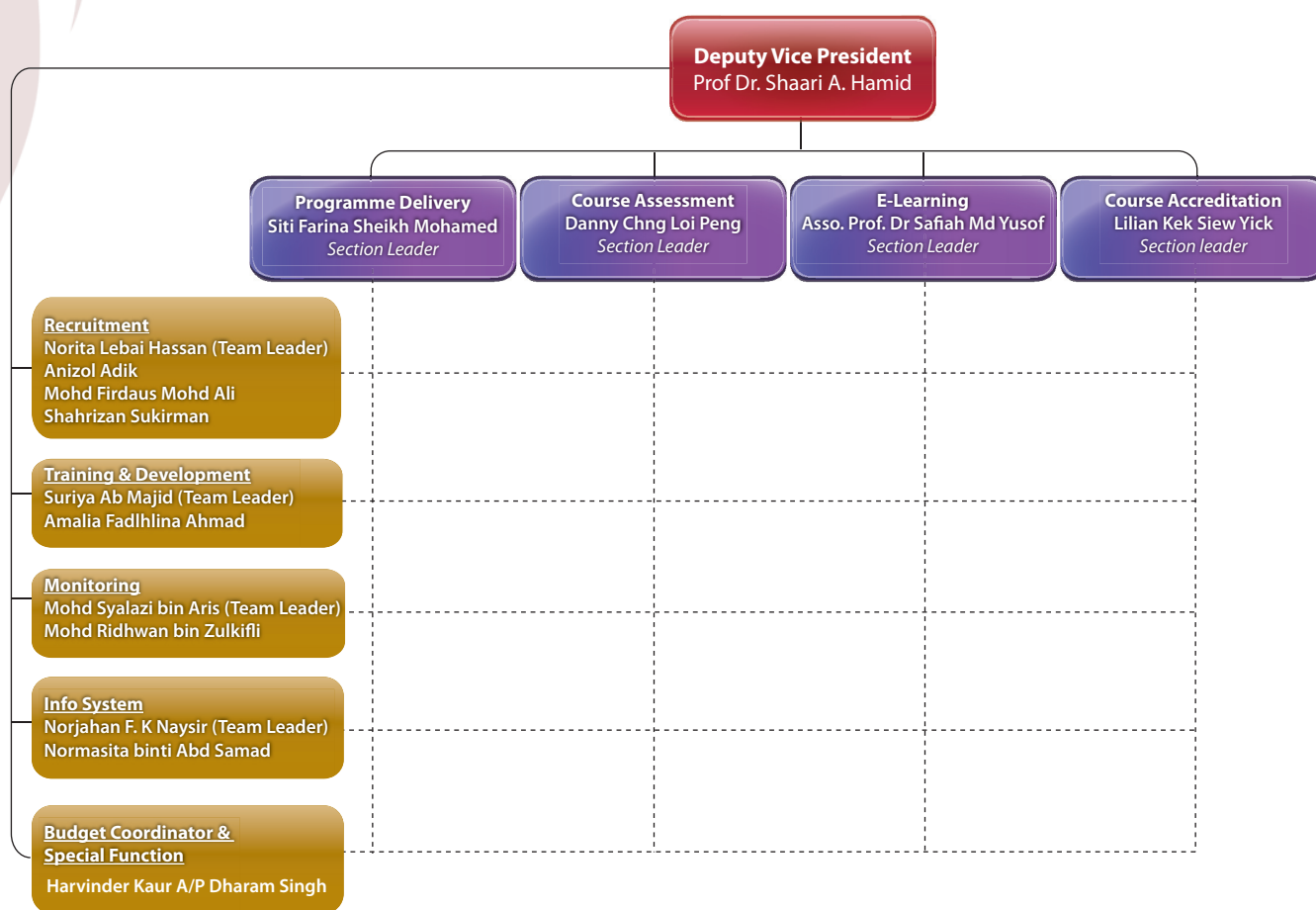
### Upcoming Activities

ACTIVITY	DATE (2010)	REMARKS
Monitoring of New/Senior Tutors and Facilitators	Tutorials/Seminars 1-5	Observation during tutorials/seminars will be conducted by Lead Tutors and OUM academic staff.

# INTRODUCING THE INSTITUTE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ADVANCEMENT (ITLA)

INTERVIEW WITH PROF DR SHAARI ABD HAMID,  
DEPUTY VICE PRESIDENT

By Dr David CL Lim (david@oum.edu.my)



**Dr David:** Please tell us about the newly established Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA), which you're heading as Deputy Vice President, and the rationale behind it.

**Prof Shaari:** The new ITLA is basically an amalgamation of three previously-existing but separate units, namely the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment (CTLA), the Centre for Assessment of Prior Learning (CAPL), and the Centre for Tutor Management and Development (CTMD). The ITLA organisation chart above shows the structure of this new institute.

It is felt that the services of these centres could be more effectively and efficiently delivered if they were combined and run as a single integrated unit.

Apart from the amalgamation of the three now-dissolved centres, ITLA also pools together tutor management-related functions. As well, it streamlines the two avenues of course accreditation, namely prior learning credit and credit transfer.

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**Dr David:** *If active tutors have queries about administrative matters and would like to seek clarification, whom should they approach?*

**Prof Shaari:** Tutors could contact [Mohd Syalazi Aris \(syalazi@oum.edu.my\)](mailto:syalazi@oum.edu.my). He would be able to answer general questions or direct tutors to the appropriate officer. If tutors have questions on e-tutoring, then they may be directed to [Dr Safiah Md Yusof \(safiah\\_mdyusof@oum.edu.my\)](mailto:safiah_mdyusof@oum.edu.my). Queries related to face-to-face tutoring can be directed to [Siti Farina Sheikh Mohamed \(sitifarina@oum.edu.my\)](mailto:sitifarina@oum.edu.my).

**Dr David:** *What new plans does ITLA have in store for the next 12 months?*

**Prof Shaari:** Activities have already started even before the establishment of ITLA. In essence, the establishment of ITLA will enable OUM to deliver teaching-learning activities in a more focused manner. With respect to assessment, OUM has embarked on its initial phase of improving assessment practices since May last year. During that semester, we adopted the multiple choice question (MCQ) format for seven courses. The number of courses with MCQs has gradually increased.

Plans are in place to introduce a more varied blend of assessment tools, thus offering the faculties a wider variety of choices to choose from, depending on the specific learning outcomes of the course. We hope to be able to finalise this before the end of the year, and we are poised for implementation beginning January 2011.

Since May this year, we have also embarked on a new form of assignment, the authentic assignment. For this form of assignment, our expectations and grading practices are made explicit to the learners through the use of assessment rubrics.

You may have also noticed that the nature of our online learning has taken a different form since last semester. With the detachment of online learning from face-to-face tutorials, a number of benefits have been made evident. A major shift has been observed with respect to the quality of discussion in the forum.

**Dr David:** *Any advice to our tutors on their role in helping learners realise their potential, a goal which is effectively contingent upon the latter remaining in the system until they graduate?*

**Prof Shaari:** I believe that our learners have the latent capacity to be great achievers. Many of them may not have been that illustrious in their earlier phase of education.



***Tutors are the direct interface between OUM and its learners. They are in the best position to provide learners the support and cooperation that learners need while studying with us.***

However, their work and life experiences would have more than compensated for this. All they need from us is some form of facilitation to enable them to capitalise on the rich learning experience that they have acquired during the intervening period before they enrol with us at OUM.

Tutors are the direct interface between OUM and its learners. They are in the best position to provide learners the support and cooperation that learners need while studying with us. Besides, tutors are best qualified to provide them the coaching that learners need in order to excel in the respective programmes in which they have enrolled. We have a special corps of tutors, highly qualified and with extensive teaching experience, quite unlike tutors in a conventional setting.

**Dr David:** *Thank you, Prof Shaari for the overview of ITLA and advice for tutors.* **TCX**



# LEARNER ATTRITION & RETENTION AT OUM: THE BIG PICTURE

By Assoc Prof Dr Santhi Raghavan (santhi@oum.edu.my)

The nature of open and distance learning (ODL) tertiary education is such that there tends to be a relatively significant learner attrition rate in comparison to the conventional universities. This applies to all ODL universities across the globe, including OUM.

To redress the issue of learner attrition, the Centre for Student Management (CSM) works hand in hand with the Directors of all Learning Centres, as well as with Lead Tutors and Tutors across the country to carry out interventionist programmes.

CSM's interventionist programmes address all categories of learners: new learners, at-risk learners, dormant learners, and all other learners.

For descriptive purposes, new learners are defined as first-semester freshies. At-risk learners are those with a grade point average (GPA) or Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of less than 2.00.

Dormant learners are learners who have not re-registered for two or more consecutive semesters, while all other learners include the rest who have been with OUM for two or more semesters.

The following overviews some of CSM's key initiatives:

## Workshops

The 'Effective Study Skills Workshop' or Bengkel Kemahiran Belajar (BKB) is conducted at the beginning of every semester to help new learners navigate their learning journey with OUM, particularly in relation to effective open and distance learning (ODL) methods of learning.

The main contents of this workshop include goal-setting strategies, time management, using myVLE, strategies in dealing with standard challenges faced by adult learners, and so on. From September 2010, all learning centres will be using the latest version of the BKB called Smart Learn.



*To overcome the loneliness of ODL, various schemes have been put in place*

Workshops on 'Effective Assignment Writing' are also conducted in learning centres.

In addition, workshops are organised for OUM staff to improve their delivery of service to the learners. The Human Resource Group routinely conducts workshops for all staff managing learners to train them on the finer points of customer relationship and telephone etiquette.

## Examinations

Some of the initiatives to improve learner retention involve tutors and Subject Matter Experts (SME) developing learning material such as i-Tutorials, FAQs and PowerPoint slides that promote active learning.

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Tutors are aware that OUM learners are primarily adult learners with different learning needs, styles and motivations as compared to fresh school leavers. These learning materials aim to aid learners in their learning process and in performing well in university assessments.

Examination clinics covering high-risk courses are also conducted by tutors to familiarise learners with past year exam questions and answering techniques.

Regular monitoring of learners' performance in both continuous assessment and final examination helps to track learners' academic progress.

### Discussion of Issues

Various channels are available for learners to discuss issues which concern them. For at-risk learners, face-to-face counselling sessions are conducted by tutors trained as counsellors. Counselling is also conducted via telephone.

Motivation and guidance given by these tutors often help the learners to persevere and take charge of their learning.

The Directors of Learning Centres across the country have been given the mandate to organise meetings every fortnight, especially with the new and at-risk learners, in order to engage them in quality discussion and provide additional support.

Any issues faced by these learners can be acted upon almost immediately at the learning centre level, or escalated to the Main Campus level if necessary.

For all other learners, the e-Customer Relationship Management (eCRM) plays an important role as the one-stop channel for learners to pose their queries, complaints, compliments and suggestions. The turnaround time for eCRM is 3 to 7 days.

OUM's senior officials routinely visit the learning centres to engage the tutors and learners in dialogue sessions.

Surveys too are conducted at regular intervals to gauge learners' and tutors' level of satisfaction and needs. These findings usually help the university to make decisions about recommending further support services for learners.

### Connectedness

To overcome the loneliness of ODL, various schemes have been put in place. For instance, the learning centres have

been conducting corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities which serve to bring the learners together.

Tutors assist the learning centre Directors and Administrators to organise sporting events (such as marathon and bowling) and social activities like *majlis berbuka puasa*.

Networking among learners, seniors, tutors and learning centre administrators helps to make the learners feel a sense of belonging to the university and their peers.

Short message service (SMS) is also used to remind learners about registration and examination dates, to update them on the latest information and to wish them well for their examinations.

### Conclusion

A combination of the interventionist strategies overviewed above aims to retain learners within the system and keep them on track in their studies.

Being able to care for learners and to help clear the path before them so that they may reach the finish line (graduation) would be an achievement in itself for the University in developing the country's human capital.

Clearly, for learners to reach the finish line would also be their high point of achievement, one which they would, after graduation, look back upon with the realisation that no less than a whole-university support effort is necessary if learners are to acquire the competencies necessary in an increasingly competitive world.

# ODL LEARNER ATTRITION & THE LIMITS OF THE TUTOR'S ROLE

By Dr Thirumeni T Subramaniam (thirumeni@oum.edu.my)  
and Prof Dr Latifah Abdol Latif (latifah@oum.edu.my)

**O**DL adult learners who discontinue their studies before completing their programmes often do so for a whole gamut of reasons, not all of which are necessarily and causally linked to the institution in which they study.

Dire financial difficulties and inability to cope with overwhelming life, work and family responsibilities are but two factors that are very often beyond the control of both the learner and the university.

Apart from these, there are, of course, other causal factors which learners can realistically do something about in order to stay on course.

Poor time management figures as one of the most critical learning barriers for at-risk learners at OUM. Other barriers include work pressure, poor learning skills, poor command of the English language, and poor mathematical skills.

These are all barriers that have not reached the overwhelming proportions that usually leave learners with little choice but to drop out.

Given the foregoing, it is important to realise that not at-risk learners are equally prepared to tackle learning problems which are theoretically not impossible to surmount.

As Moore (1986) underscores, there are fundamentally three kinds of working adult learners.

The first consists of self-directed learners who have decided that the teaching programmes of their institution meet their learning goals.

The second category refers to self-directed learners who are motivated by the need for certification which can only be obtained by following the teaching programmes offered by the institution.

The third adult learner category refers to learners who are not self-directed but use the educational institution to satisfy their emotional needs for dependence.



***Poor time management figures as one of the most critical learning barriers for at-risk learners at OUM.***

It is this third category which requires our attention the most.

Cook (1993) states that the two common characteristics that have an impact on learning efficacy and the overall classroom experience for adult learners are lifetime experiences and the self-directedness of the learner.

Learners who are unable to incorporate lifetime experiences into their studies and to direct their own learning are considered to be at risk. The slightest hurdle will weigh them down and eventually force them to leave the system.

In view of all this, several initiatives have been put in place to help these learners. (See Dr Santhi's piece for a big picture view).

To highlight but a few initiatives, in January 2009, the Centre for Student Management introduced Online Academic

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Of course, the existence of such support will not automatically make learners self-directed.

This is where tutors, as a point of contact for OUM, play a crucial role in reaching out to their learners in order to help them to take advantage of the available support.

***Tutors, as a point of contact for OUM, play a crucial role in reaching out to their learners.***

Tutors can help their learners in this and other ways, as discussed in this issue of TCX.

Ultimately, however, there is only so much that tutors can do to support their learners, especially those in the at-risk category.

The learners themselves also need to work at surmounting the barriers they face in order to become self-directed and effective in setting goals for their learning and evaluating their learning performance. **TCX**

## ONLINE POLL

**Tutors can ensure that learners continue their studies in OUM by:**

- Ensuring that learners can reach tutors most of the time for consultation.
- Making sure that learners understand the course material during tutorials.
- Setting easy questions as assessment so that learners are not discouraged by the subject.
- Designing the tutorial activities in such a way that learners appreciate the subject.

**Cast your votes online at [tcx.oum.edu.my](http://tcx.oum.edu.my)**

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# NEW CHEMISTRY IN THE FACULTY

## INTERVIEW WITH PROF DR LATIFAH ABDOL LATIF

### DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (FST)

By Dr David CL Lim (david@oum.edu.my)

*Dr David: Tell us a bit about yourself as an academic and recently new Dean of the Faculty of Science and Technology (FST).*

**Prof Latifah:** I graduated with a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Chemistry in 1979 from the University of Queensland. After working for several months in UM as a tutor, I went to do my PhD in the University of Sussex in the field of Organometallic Chemistry and came back to UM as a lecturer.

I held the lecturer and Associate Professor posts during my tenure from 1984 to 2002. Most of my time was spent teaching Chemistry to the Matriculation students, and the rest of my time was allocated for research in Chemistry at the Science Faculty.

I was awarded a 9-month British Fellowship to carry out research in Chemistry at the University of Wales in 1997. In 2002, I was awarded the American Fulbright Fellowship which I had to forgo because of my appointment to OUM in 2002.

I came in as an Associate Professor, and in 2003 I was appointed the Director of the Centre for Student Management (CSM) which I held for two terms from 2003 to 2009.

In May 2010, I had to relinquish my Directorship due to my recent appointment as the Dean of FST. Being a Dean is not that much different from being a Director; both positions require good skills in planning and managing the programmes and staff, as well as ensuring that all processes are in place.

Faculty matters are mostly academic in nature and have to be dealt with in a stringent manner. As the Dean, my greatest concern is to make sure that the existing courses and programmes are relevant and to come up with new programmes that cater to the interests of working adults.

Since May 2010, the faculty has been given the green light to go ahead with the preparation of the MQA documents for



***OUM is an ODL institution; the openness in itself inevitably invites attrition.***

Master in Occupational Safety Health Management, Master of Environmental Science and Bachelor in Environmental Science, which have all been vetted by the respective Boards of Studies.

The recent announcement on the nine FST programmes that will be phased out in the September 2010 semester has given the faculty members some food for thought.

In an ODL environment, programmes that are too technical and require laboratories are to be avoided, especially when learner intake is small.

FST will instead develop programmes related to the soft sciences and mathematics and also programmes that cater to the communities at large. The faculty is working hard towards this end.

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**Dr David:** Prior to your present position as Dean of FST, you were the Director of CSM. Can you share with us the insights you gained then, in terms of learner retention, where OUM and other Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions around the world are concerned?

**Prof Latifah:** While in CSM, my core area of responsibility was learner retention. While we can take an easy way out by recruiting more learners every semester (which in reality is not any easier as learners shop around nowadays), it is the responsibility of OUM to ensure that enrolled learners are given the right support so that they can complete their studies and achieve their goals.

OUM is an ODL institution; the openness in itself inevitably invites attrition. Now, there are many reasons why learners leave an institution, and among the most common are financial, and this is especially critical when learners have to make the transition from semester one to semester two.

Beyond semester two, most learners who do not register are those who face personal problems such as not being able to manage their time, conflicts with family and work demands, and so on.

Under my directorship, CSM had designed several programmes to help learners overcome their problems. These include academic counselling, learning skills workshops, examination clinics, dialogue sessions for gathering feedback, and also a call centre to contact dormant learners.

Social activities for the learners are also arranged, such as sports, recreational as well as academic activities in the form of seminars, IT competitions, and so on.

**Dr David:** Sometimes learners drop out for reasons beyond the control of the university and tutors, such as financial difficulties and overwhelming load at work. At the same time, there must surely be certain factors that the university and tutors can help where learner retention is concerned. Can you expand on this?

**Prof Latifah:** Many factors contribute to learners deciding to leave a university. They can be grouped under institutional and personal. Most of the reasons are personal, in which there is nothing much the university can do to help, except to provide guidance and advice through counselling sessions.

Institutional factors may not have a direct influence but can contribute to the final decision made by learners. Foremost, the institution needs to provide efficient and learner-friendly services. Being adult learners, they want to be treated with respect, so it is vital that all interactions between staff and learners be kept courteous, professional and responsive.

**Foremost, the institution needs to provide efficient and learner-friendly services.**

Staff members also need to show a caring attitude. Sometimes learners just need someone to listen to them venting their frustrations. Other than the human touch, OUM's modules need to be tip-top, error-free and easy to understand.

Learners should also be closely guided so that they are familiar with the ODL environment, particularly when it comes to preparing for online and self-managed learning.

Since many face financial problems, OUM should seek ways and means of helping them solve their financial issues. For those who are eligible for PTPTN and EPF withdrawal, OUM should help them upfront with the applications so as to avoid delays in getting the funds.

Perhaps the most vital role of the institution in terms of retaining learners concerns teaching and learning. The e-learning platform, with all its necessary technological requirements, should make it easy for learners to access and navigate the available resources.

Contents should be adequate and useful. They should be engaging and interesting to sustain learners' interest in learning. There should also be sufficient exercises to provide learners with formative feedback. As well, there should be responsive and reliable feedback from tutors concerning their performance.

(Continued on next page)

In summary, OUM needs to delight learners and strive for service excellence. Today's competitive environment demands nothing less than excellence in customer services.

Otherwise, we will lose our learners; they will not come to OUM, and even if they have enrolled with us, they may leave.

**Dr David:** *What advice would you give to tutors who may or may not be aware that their performance as tutors has significant bearing on whether their learners complete their respective programmes or drop out?*

**Prof Latifah:** I see the tutorial sessions as a game carried out in the field. The learning centre provides the field, and the players are the learners. In this context, tutors play a variety of roles: as a referee/regulator, manager, facilitator, provider, promoter and enforcer in the field of teaching-learning.

As a regulator/referee, tutors are to encourage learners to participate in all activities, be it learning or social. Tutors help learners manage their time, and help them resolve their problems, and at the same time provide advice and guidance.

The tutors' main responsibility is to facilitate learning, whether face-to-face or online. Tutors should at all times promote learner retention, and should motivate learners all the way to sustain their drive to achieve.

While tutors are expected to be friendly and caring, they also ought to be an enforcer of the Code of Ethics. From time to time, learners need to be reminded about the dos and don'ts as specified in the University's rules and regulations.

**Dr David:** *What steps is FST taking to help ensure that FST learners complete their studies instead of going off-course and prematurely exiting the system?*

**Prof Latifah:** The advantage of being a new member of the faculty is that I can bring about some changes to the faculty. I would like to see all programme leaders and staff take full responsibility in ensuring the effectiveness of the courses run at the faculty.

This means that staff will be monitoring the learning activities during critical times such as during the first tutorial, mid-term test, submission of assignment and before the final examination. At the end of the semester, programme leaders will administer an online course evaluation survey to gather feedback on all aspects of the courses.

Once we have identified the strengths and weaknesses of the programmes, the faculty will be able to react accordingly. The strengths will be used to promote the programme and the weaknesses will be resolved by reflecting on what has been done and what needs to be done to enhance the programme.

Programme review will be a regular feature of special faculty meetings which are held at the end of every semester, after the results of learners have been released. This process ensures that every staff member takes pride and responsibility in their own programmes and will also promote team spirit, which is to me critical for the success of the faculty.

**Dr David:** *On science and technology, where do you think these two overlapping fields will go in the next 10 to 20 years, trend-wise?*

**Prof Latifah:** Converging the two areas of science and technology is a necessity in today's world. Their applications are wide in all spheres of activity.

In OUM, both fields have been put under one faculty, namely the Faculty of Science and Technology. I believe combining the two big disciplines is a necessity because they share common principles. In order to train the technical labour force, for example, both scientific and technological principles need to be applied, and it is hard to separate the two.

Under the present faculty, many new multidisciplinary programmes are being developed, and presently, the faculty is focusing on areas such as environment and safety.

The buzz words nowadays are green technology, environmental sustainability, renewable energy, and so on. That indicates the importance of environmental aspects of education and management. Another area that has recently captured a lot of interest among the labour force is the area of occupational safety and health.

Every organisation now is required by law to have a qualified safety and health officer. OUM offers the Bachelor of Occupational Safety and Health Management, while the Master of Occupational Safety and Health Management is in the pipeline. We hope to see the Master of Environmental Studies being offered in January 2011 and the Bachelor of Environmental Studies in May 2011.

**Dr David:** *Many thanks, Prof Latifah, for sharing with us your views and insights on the workings of the Faculty.*

TCX



# TEARS & OPPORTUNITIES: REFLECTIONS OF A TUTOR

By Harvinder Kaur Dharam Singh (harvinder@oum.edu.my)

It was another semester and another tutorial class that I had led as a tutor. It was business as usual during one of the tutorials, when I tried to engage my tutees to articulate their thoughts and views on a topic we were covering in class.

Randomly I invited a few learners to pitch in. Some had something to say; a few did not, seemingly unprepared for class.

As usual, I continued to intersperse questions with mini-lectures to explain certain concepts.

As the class was focusing on me, I noticed that one of the learners to whom I had posed a question was starting to cry, silently, to my surprise.

None of her peers noticed the tears streaming down her cheeks, even as she tried to follow the lesson, which I continued until we took a midway break.

During the break, I went up and spoke to the tutee who was in tears, concerned about her. Gently and compassionately, as I asked if she was alright, she began to shed even more tears, looking sad and lost.

Nevertheless, the tutee managed to open up to me, explaining that she was under a lot of pressure.

Her husband was away, working offshore, and she was having problems trying to understand and complete an assignment for another course that she was taking in the same semester.

The break was short and we resumed class soon after but this particular learner and I managed to talk some more after tutorial. It was then, as I tried to motivate her, and help her to see that, sometimes, our problems are not as huge as we imagine them to be.

As I explained to her the requirements of the assignment she had to complete for another course, she began to cheer up somewhat, realizing that what the assignment required of her was not beyond her ability to complete.



*The challenge for me as a tutor, then, is to never to be too presumptuous when engaging with learners.*

This episode gave me an opportunity to critically reflect on my role as a tutor, a role I have been playing for five years now.

It made me realise that it is often all too easy for tutors to think of some learners (who seem unprepared for tutorials) as lazy, uninterested or deficient.

It made me realise also that behind every convenient label lies a flesh-and-blood learner who is facing what is possibly one of his/her greatest challenges in life – the challenge of moving ahead in life, or even staying afloat amidst pressures from all directions.

The challenge for me as a tutor, then, is never to be too presumptuous when engaging with learners. The moral, on the other hand, is even more enlightening: it is to bear in mind that a little compassion and demonstration of genuine concern go a long way in helping learners to clear the fog of life so that they stand the best chance of staying on course in their studies. **TCX**

# THE EXTRA MILE

Compiled by Assoc Prof Dr Tan Toh Wah (tantohwah@oum.edu.my)

Even though ODL learners are expected to spend at least 80 percent of their study time doing self-managed learning, the majority of our learners still consider face-to-face sessions with tutors as the most important component in the blended mode of learning.

Learners, especially those at-risk, would especially like to see their tutors go the extra mile to help them stay on track and improve in their studies. The following pointers were distilled from learners whose views I had solicited in order to find out what they would like their tutors to do to help them in their learning journey. Whether all their expectations are reasonable or justified is something that remains open to debate.

## Systematic handling of tutorials

Tutors play a crucial role in optimising the tutorials they lead. They need to ensure that learners get the most out of what little time they spend with them.

Learners expect systematic content discussion, meaning they expect to see an orderly build-up instead of seeing their tutors jump back and forth erratically from topic to topic, which can be confusing.

At the same time, tutors must pace their delivery in such a way that it is neither too fast nor too slow for the learners.

## Building rapport with learners

Despite living in a technological age, the human touch is still valued. Tutors should attempt to develop rapport with their learners to make sure that communication channels remain smooth and open.

Learners want to be treated as friends; there should be respect but there should also be a degree of closeness.

Also, tutors should try to understand the limitations of working adults who have to juggle work, studies and family.

## Guiding the Learners in completing assignments

Tutors are expected to be knowledgeable and well-prepared so that they can provide definitions, explanations, examples and relevant information other than what is already in the modules.



*Despite living in a technological age, the human touch is still valued.*

They should be able to answer questions put forward by the learners instead of posing the questions back to the learners.

Learners can look for the answers themselves, but they need guidance on how to filter and use that information effectively. This will be useful especially when it comes to working on their assignments.

## Providing additional learning materials

The modules only provide the basic knowledge required by learners to get them started with their courses. To excel, they need to refer beyond the modules.

Learners expect their tutors to provide them with additional learning materials to further reinforce their learning. These include lecture notes, handouts, power point slides, topic summaries and past year questions.

## Summation

Before we jump to the conclusion that learners are unhappy with their tutors, I would like to reiterate that the majority of our learners are satisfied, if not happy, with their tutors and think of them as helpful and approachable.

However, many feel that their tutors could be even more effective if they make the effort to deliver added value to tutorial sessions by taking into consideration the expectations sketched above. **TCX**

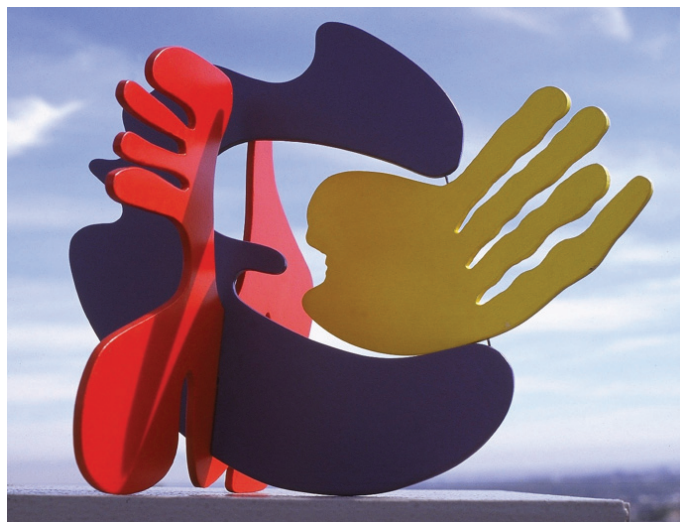
# WHAT TUTORS CAN DO TO CARE FOR LEARNERS I

Compiled by Jimmy Teo Hui Thian (jteo@oum.edu.my)

**T**utors play an important role in helping learners deal with their academic needs and personal development. They are also there to ensure that learners are guided towards their learning goals and make the most of their tutorials and online discussions.

Below is the collective feedback from tutors who have put into practice what they believe tutors can do to care for their learners:

1. Encourage and motivate learners to read ahead of their tutorials so that tutorial time can be productively maximised.
2. Be a good role model and inspire learners to excel in whatever they do.
3. Give clear explanations in class and solicit extra information for learners' benefit.
4. Discuss past year questions to prepare learners for exams.
5. Encourage discussions, be it in class or online, in order to gauge learners' understanding.
6. Be in constant communication with learners to decrease their sense of isolation.
7. Help learners understand what they need to do in order to be successful online learners.
8. Ensure that tutorials and discussions are learner-centred.
9. Put in extra effort in lesson planning to maximise learning during tutorials.
10. Demonstrate honesty, sincerity and dedication when helping learners.
11. Explain assignment questions thoroughly to prevent learners from going off-tangent.
12. Provide extra notes and (online) resources for difficult topics.
13. Reflect on lessons and teaching methods to optimise teaching-learning and to cater for different learning styles.
14. Treat learners as adult and respect their views and opinions.
15. Be proficient and competent in the subject matter. **TCX**



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# WHAT TUTORS CAN DO TO CARE FOR LEARNERS II

Compiled by Lamjin Atoh (lamjin@oum.edu.my)

Learner attrition may not be uncommon especially in ODL institutions but there are nonetheless key steps that tutors can take to ensure that their learners stay for the long haul. Here are some views from OUM tutors:

## Support sessions for learners

Generally, tutors and learners agree that attrition is often related to learners' uncertainties regarding their study programmes and university rules. OUM has introduced many changes to maintain and improve its position locally and globally, among which include changes to the medium of instruction, examination format, course structure, assessment methods, and faculty leadership. If learners are unhappy, alternatives are easily available, even in Sandakan. If a better option presents itself, learners are likely to jump ship.

Because tutors are closely connected to the learners, they play an important role in preventing attrition. Tutors can sense if their learners are having problems if they constantly monitor their learners' attendance and participation in tutorials. The learning centre administrators should be alerted when problems begin to develop. Marketing and promoting new programmes will not help unless the root causes of attrition are discovered.

To combat attrition, every learning centre should conduct support sessions to help learners, especially those who are at-risk. The aim is to provide social support and explain structural changes to the learners. These sessions should be attended by the administrators, tutors, alumni members, and learners. Hopefully this will go some way towards alleviating any fear of change which learners may have.

*Dr Ng Kim Choy*  
Lead Tutor  
Sandakan Learning Centre

## Show of care

It is not easy to pinpoint one single factor which causes learners to withdraw from their programmes. Many factors could potentially contribute to attrition. Learners may drop out because they lack time to study, are unable to understand



***When the going gets tough, some of them may feel that they are just not tough enough to keep on going.***

the subject, or have low self-esteem. When the going gets tough, some of them may feel that they are just not tough enough to keep on going.

As providers of higher learning, we have to ensure that learners have the best chance to excel in their studies. During tutorials, tutors need to personally engage their learners and challenge them to improve themselves. When learners feel that their tutors care for them, it makes such a positive difference to their morale.

During the first semester, the learners are taken through a course which would supposedly help them cope with their academic life. Once this course is over, they seem to be left to fend for themselves for the remainder of their study duration.

Abraham Maslow believes that every human being needs social support to stay motivated in their quest to improve. Knowing this, OUM should conduct motivational camps and study seminars from time to time. This would constantly remind them that they have plenty of room for improvement. This would make the learners feel appreciated and taken care of. Learners want to feel that they matter over and above any profit-making interest.

*Shanmuganathan Ramasamy*  
Lead Tutor  
Kota Kinabalu Learning Centre

# THE MIRACLE BRIDGE

Adapted by Azeezah Jameelah Mohamed Mohideen (azeezah@oum.edu.my)

In 1883, a creative engineer named John Roebling was inspired by an idea to build a spectacular bridge connecting New York with Long Island. Bridge-building experts throughout the world thought this was impossible and told Roebling to forget it.

However, Roebling could not ignore the vision he had in his mind. He thought about the bridge all the time and believed it could be built. He just had to share the dream with someone else. After much discussion and persuasion, John succeeded in convincing his son Washington, an up-and-coming engineer, to work with him.

Joining forces for the first time, both father and son developed concepts of how the bridge could be made a reality. With great excitement, inspiration and the headiness of tackling a great challenge, they hired their crew and commenced to build their dream bridge.

Alas, a few months later, a tragic accident took place on the site. It took the life of John Roebling. Washington was injured and suffered brain damage, which resulted in him not being able to walk, talk or even move.

“We told them so.”

“Crazy men and their crazy dreams.”

“It’s foolish to chase wild visions.”

Everyone had a negative comment to make and felt that the project should be scrapped since the Roeblings were the only ones who knew how to build the bridge. But Washington was not discouraged although he was then handicapped. He still had a burning desire to complete the bridge.

As Washington lay on his bed in his hospital room, with the sunlight streaming through the windows, a gentle breeze blew the flimsy white curtains apart and he was able to see the sky and the tops of the trees outside for just a moment.

It seemed that there was a message for him not to give up. Suddenly, an idea hit him. All he could do was move one finger and he decided to make the best use of it. By moving the finger, he slowly developed a code of communication with his wife.



He touched his wife’s arm with that finger, indicating to her that he wanted her to call the engineers again. Then, he used the same method of tapping her arm to tell the engineers what to do. It seemed tedious but the project was under way again. For 13 years, Washington tapped out instructions with his finger on his wife’s arm, until the bridge was finally completed. Today, the Brooklyn Bridge stands in all its glory as a tribute to the triumph of one man’s indomitable spirit and his determination not to be defeated by circumstances.

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**Adapted from:** Determination & Persistence - A True Motivational Story. CiteHr.com. Retrieved August 12, 2010, from <http://www.citehr.com/24866-determination-persistence-true-motivational-story.html>



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