

THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models &
Messages

Lessons from
Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

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A newly created institution



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



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for Educational Planning

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List of abbreviations

BBA	Bachelor of Business Administration
CTO	Chief Technology Officer
IT	Information Technology
MBA	Master of Business Administration
UNITAR	Universiti Tun Abdul Razak

Developments since 2003

1. UNITAR and its context

The number of higher institutions in Malaysia has increased considerably, from fifteen to seventeen public universities and university colleges, and from fourteen to twenty-seven private universities and university colleges.¹ The significant increase in the number of private universities and university colleges has been due to the upgrading of private colleges that have been in operation for more than a decade, and have demonstrated excellent capacity for providing high-quality education. Having been granted university or university college status, they have the option to offer their own degrees. Previously, they could only offer qualifications up to the diploma level, which is categorically lower than a bachelor degree. The second reason for the significant increase in the number of private higher institutions is the desire of the government to attract highly reputable foreign universities to establish branch campuses in Malaysia in order to provide programmes of international standing. This is in line with the intention of the government to make Malaysia the centre for educational excellence in the region.

1.1 National context

In the late 1990s, the government intended to implement on a large scale the ‘smart school’ concept, which is essentially a modified version of e-learning. It was not fully implemented, although a pilot project was conducted in a small number of schools. While the smart school project did not fully materialize, in 2002 the government instead introduced a new policy of teaching mathematics and science in English, starting with the first two years of primary school. This policy was implemented, by introducing the use of courseware or course content in multimedia format on CD-ROM, in order to mitigate the problem of a shortage of capable teachers to teach the two subjects in English. Such a policy certainly enhances the potential of the Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) to expand once these pupils, familiar with computer-aided learning from early in their school careers, reach university level.

It is also a policy of the Ministry of Education to move forward with the advancement of technology by introducing e-learning in teacher training colleges. Special in-service training programmes in Information Technology (IT) are also being conducted to provide teachers with the relevant knowledge in IT.

UNITAR should stand to benefit from both these policy changes. Indeed, UNITAR and the Ministry of Education are working together to conduct IT training for existing teachers in schools.

1.2 International context

The UNITAR teaching and learning model has also succeeded in attracting other institutions in the region to collaborate in programme delivery. These institutions include Assumption University in Bangkok, Thailand, Universitas Muslim Indonesia in Makassar, Indonesia and

¹ Instead of establishing fully fledged universities, the government introduced the concept of the university college, which is meant to be smaller in enrolment and concentrating on teaching at undergraduate level in very specialized fields (e.g. engineering, technical, etc.). These university colleges are independent institutions, not affiliated with any university system, as they are in the United Kingdom, for instance.

Asian University of Bangladesh in Dakka, Bangladesh. UNITAR is also discussing similar collaboration with other institutions in China and Taiwan.

2. UNITAR: its creation, organization and current programme

Minimal changes have taken place following what has been written about the creation and organization of UNITAR. However, there have been significant changes made to the current programme.

2.1 Organization

There were some changes in the organizational structure of UNITAR in 2002. First, there was a move to downsize the workforce, particularly in the technical department. It had been thought that the technical department should be run quite independently in order to focus on providing technical support as well as spin-off technical products. However, the commercial objective was not well achieved, resulting in the decision being taken to downsize UNITAR. The subsidiary company of UNITAR, United Multimedia, ceased operations, and the remaining fifty members of the staff were absorbed by UNITAR.

The top management of UNITAR was also reorganized to have a president and three vice presidents, one each for academic and student affairs, technology and operations. The rest remain more or less the same. The Vice-President (Technology) is currently the Dean of the Faculty of Information Technology as well as the Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of the university. The university has therefore done away with the position of CTO.

2.2 Current programme

There are twenty-seven academic programmes, from diploma to Ph.D. level, in business administration, management, information technology and hospitality management. The number of students has clearly increased to around 8,000. The fourth convocation, in October 2004, saw a very significant increase in the number of graduates, from the previous 241 to more than 1,000. The fifth convocation is anticipated to have around 1,500 graduates.

The graduates of UNITAR are readily absorbed by the market because of their competency in English and IT skills, and this in the midst of high national levels of graduate unemployment.

3. Administrative issues

3.1 Administration

There are no significant changes to the administration of the university, despite the minor changes at the top and marginal changes in the middle-level management.

3.2 Costs and financing

It is important to note that since its third year of operations, the university has not required any assistance in financing. In fact, in its fourth year of operations, it even managed to repay some of the advances made by the parent company. By the fifth year, it was already in the black and, since then, has needed no more assistance from the parent company.

3.3 Technological infrastructure

The rapid rate of technological obsolescence necessitates considerable investment in upgrading the technical equipment. The university is increasingly deploying new broadband technologies to ensure the utmost satisfaction of its customers, namely the students. The upgrading and replacement of equipment and infrastructure is clearly an annual affair and, as such, requires sufficient long-term allocation of resources.

4. Academic issues

The university has been in operation for seven years, and it is time for consolidation in the types of programme offered, in terms of the competition it is facing, the market demand, and the suitability of such programmes to the virtual setting.

4.1 Programme development

Due to the demand for a wider choice of programmes for potential students, the university has embarked on four distinctly different academic disciplines, namely English, education, accounting and hospitality. These four new disciplines have been identified as having market potential and consequently four new bachelor programmes have been developed and offered, beginning in January 2005. It is obvious that education attracted the highest number of students because of the perceived high rate of employability. Since January is not the most appropriate time for a major intake, the other programmes have had a low level of response.

4.2 Teaching

One of the problems for UNITAR, which is related to the rapid increase in the number of new programmes, is the difficulty for the Technology Division to catch up with the development of courseware. For this reason, teaching has to be adapted to the availability of the courseware. However, a private university that greatly depends on student numbers for its commercial viability does not have the luxury of a long planning period. Teaching has to go on and courseware, meanwhile, has to be quickly developed.

4.3 Learning

Students who do not work have no problem attending lectures. However, those working adults who expect to learn at a distance through their computers find it very frustrating to have to attend regular lectures. These are the problems a private virtual university has to face, although such problems are not expected to be an issue after one or two semesters, when the courseware has been developed.

5. Cooperation

Cooperation with other higher institutions of learning, inside as well as outside the country, is really the key to UNITAR's expansion programme. Through existing partnerships, as well as collaborations with new institutions in Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia and Bangladesh, UNITAR offers programmes that are highly marketable in other countries across the region. For instance, Universitas Muslim Indonesia in Makassar is collaborating with UNITAR to offer a Ph.D. in management (by research). At the time of writing Assumption University is planning to conduct UNITAR's Master of Business Administration (MBA), Western University in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, is conducting UNITAR's Bachelor of Business

Administration (BBA) and Asian University of Bangladesh is offering the Bachelor of Information Technology, BBA and MBA programmes.

6. Future developments and institutional change

UNITAR is seriously looking at building its own mini campus, which would constitute a symbol of the 'real' university and help create a sense of belonging among students. This is strongly believed to be a great success factor because of the profile of students who come directly from school and who can relate to a campus-based university more easily.

Secondly, going forward, UNITAR should endeavour to strengthen its postgraduate education, both professional and research based, because of the increasing need for higher education among working adults. A strong postgraduate programme would certainly attract more working adults, who appreciate virtual education more than those who have just completed high school.

Specialized, skill-enhancing short courses would be apt for working adults, who are often not attracted to a long, drawn-out programme leading to a formal educational qualification. Programmes that are suitable for corporate training are also suitable for e-learning.

Competition is becoming steeper, with an increasing number of private and public higher institutions in the country.

7. Policy development, planning and management: lessons learned and recommendations

I would reiterate the original list of lessons learned. I would especially reinforce the need for face-to-face interaction, for several reasons.

- The importance of social interaction as a form of education is very pertinent, because the working life of graduates is real and requires tremendous experience in social interaction. A campus, however small, with minimal recreational facilities, will be a key success factor.
- Virtual education, especially at the undergraduate level, is still not received well by society. Students need to learn academic and communication skills to equip them for working life. Whether they study in a virtual or real environment is not the issue, although if possible, they still would prefer a conventional education setting.
- Virtual education may be acceptable at higher educational levels such as for a Masters and a Ph.D. It is also true that even working adults do not like to spend too long studying for a particular course.
- Short courses, in the form of corporate training, would be more appropriate to the virtual environment.

Finally, I would like to add that many find it difficult to adapt to a new environment. They need time and confidence. Changing the environment, methodology or approach certainly requires a long time before such changes can be accepted. This has been observed in an agricultural setting, where farmers could not adapt to a structured timetable of activities that would enable them to maximize their output. They still prefer their own old ways.