



COUNTRY PRESENTATION – BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

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OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

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Introduction

Brunei Darussalam is a Malay Muslim Monarchy situated on the north-west coast of the island of Borneo. It has an area of 2,226 sq. miles (5,679 sq. km) and a population of around 314, 400 (in 1997) of which two-third are Malays and the remainder Chinese, indigenous people and other smaller groups. The official language of the country is Malay, but English is widely used as a medium of instruction in schools and other educational institutions.

Economically, Brunei Darussalam is very dependent on the production of crude oil and natural gas. With per capita income of about US\$17,000 a year, the country has one of the highest standards of living in Asia. Currently, the country is going through a period of rapid development and modernisation with increased emphasis on diversification of the economy and the provision of quality education, welfare and health services.

In spite of the universally accepted potential benefits of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, education delivery in Brunei Darussalam is still based on entirely, on a formal conventional system of education. This is attributed to its smallness in terms geographical area whereby all points in and around the country are accessible, and that education could be provided and delivered through conventional method.

In addition, in view of its small population and stable economy, Brunei has been able to provide favourable and accommodating educational infrastructure and set out policies that allow opportunities for Bruneians to access education in the conventional way. Consequently, ODL has not established any significant inroads as alternative modes of accessing education in Brunei Darussalam.

The Move Towards the Use of ODL in Brunei Darussalam

Despite the absence of any substantive plan to adopt this system of education delivery, Brunei Darussalam nonetheless, acknowledges the benefits of ODL, particularly, in relation to widening access in education; its flexibility and versatility in fulfilling constant re-training, 're-skilling' and up-grading requirements in an ever changing society and market economy; including its perceived cost-effectiveness and lesser cost features.

In addition, having to face with a number of phenomena consistent with its effort to cater for constant human resource and manpower requirements, ODL seems to be an ideal alternative mode of education delivery worthy of consideration for implementation. The phenomenon mentioned includes the following:

1. Records show that the number of students eligible for tertiary studies is increasing annually. Since demand exceeds supply, therefore, places for study at local institutions are becoming limited, and consequently, entry onto local tertiary institutions is rather competitive and admission requirement is getting higher and tougher to fulfill.
2. As a major employer employing about 60% of the workforce in Brunei, and in order to continuously fulfill constant human resource development requirements, the government may wish to opt for a new strategy such as this method of delivery, so as to avoid 'vacuuming' within its workforce if training and skills delivery have to be implemented conventionally. In addition, the perceived benefit of ODL capable of providing such requirements at a faster rate would certainly be worth exploring.
3. In the present context of ever changing global economy, coupled with the explosion of knowledge, advances in technologies particularly in information and communication technology, the need to constantly update oneself to acquire various skills and new knowledge is indeed a necessity if one is to participate fully in society and economy. In this respect, the flexible nature of ODL becomes an attractive option in fulfilling such needs.
4. Since Brunei has established a well-developed ICT network, therefore, this facilitates various government ICT based projects such as e-government, e-education, e-learning, e-library, including the implementation ODL system should a decision has been made concerning this.
5. Consistent with the Ministry of Education's mission to 'provide holistic education to achieve fullest potential for all', and in line with strategic goals laid out which among others include: provide more choice of education; develop life-long learning skills; including, prepare students with valuable and marketable skills. These blend in towards the use of ODL as one of the ways of achieving those goals.

The Roles and Nature of ODL

Based on records, there has been increasing number of private institutions and training agencies providing various courses through ODL method, through special arrangements with foreign institutions of higher learning, professional bodies and training agencies. The way at which ODL is operating, is mostly by utilising a combination of methods between face-to-face and individualised learning using internet and various multimedia technologies.

The local agencies normally provide services such as registration and administrative roles; provide various educational infrastructure facilities including computer and internet access; arrangements for examination and assessment requirement; and, occasional visiting lecturers. For master degree courses, students are required to undertake some residential studies at the main university campus normally in the final or last semester/term.

Most courses offered are in the field of business administration, professional accounting, law, information and computer studies including some academic subjects such as economic and sciences ranging from degree courses level, professional qualifications, as well as the basic skills such as courses in International Computer Driving License.

Although the courses offered aimed primarily for working adults, records also show that students and the unemployed are also doing courses under ODL method mainly for the purposes of acquiring new skills and knowledge, and indeed for fulfilling personal pursuit and enrichment.

Consideration pertaining to Policy and Regulation of ODL

In view of the increasing number of ODL courses run privately by various private organisations, institutions and training agencies, and in order to ensure that matters relating to quality assurance requirements are fulfilled, also for the purpose of securing consumer protection for users, the government through the Brunei Darussalam National Accreditation Council (BDNAC) is charged with the responsibility to oversee this matter.

While it is acknowledged that foreign universities, training agencies and awarding bodies offering courses through ODL in Brunei could assist in fulfilling the diverse human resource needs of Brunei Darussalam, it is also important to ensure that the quality of courses provided meet quality assurance requirements set by the BDNAC, a sole national accrediting agency in the country. In this respect, since ODL is an imported educational product, BDNAC has to act accordingly, as a consumer of the product rather than a recipient of a public good. For that matter, whatever benchmark pertaining to quality and standard in relation to accreditation and recognition of ODL courses and qualifications set forth by BDNAC, it has to be accepted that 'customer is always right' and that the quality standard set by BDNAC fits the purpose in the context of Brunei Darussalam.

In order to achieve the perceived quality in ODL offered in Brunei, the special committee of BDNAC has indicated some features for consideration if ODL is accepted, and these among others include the following:

1. In the absence of recognition and aspects of quality assurance in any ODL courses, the perceived potential advantages of ODL such as access and equity are meaningless. Therefore, it is important that the institutions and their courses must first be accredited by the government of the country of origin and/or by any accrediting agencies recognised by the government.

As for courses in professional field such as accountancy, engineering, law, architecture and pharmacy, they have to be accorded with accreditation by professional bodies in the fields concerned, and that the qualifications must be accepted for the purpose of professional registration and practice.

2. ODL courses conducted must be through a combination of both face-to-face and distance learning using multimedia technology. In addition, its implementation has to be based on collaborative partnership arrangements between foreign providers and the local public or private agencies.

Local partner will provide or acts as a study centre responsible to provide the following services:

- i. A place for individual study in appropriate environment and at appropriate times.
- ii. Library facilities including e-library
- iii. Facilities for taking test, examination and various forms of assessment
- iv. Information centre (in administrative, management, record keeping etc) and provide guidance to the general public
- v. Access to technology
- vi. Acts as a meeting point enabling students to meet with ODL institutions' lecturer, administrator, and also enabling students to meet fellow students in the same and/or different course.

Funding of ODL

Since ODL in Brunei Darussalam is still at its preliminary planning stages, government funding in this mode of education delivery has not been considered. In

this respect, if ODL has proven to be an effective and capable method of assisting Brunei to achieve its education and training needs, then government investment in this matter became feasible. At this point, ideas have been mooted among policymakers that the following aspects could be considered for implementation:

- i. Students and government personnel could be considered for either full or partial scholarship awards to study through ODL should they fulfill the criteria set by various government scholarship agencies.
- ii. Private local education providers in ODL maybe given some form of government incentives for instance by providing financial assistance, facilitates in acquiring physical educational infrastructure, including land tenure etc
- iii. Government institutions of higher learning will be encouraged to promote collaboration with foreign universities or colleges to run courses through ODL. Collaboration and coordination would include research work or project in the areas of curriculum, technology provision, assessment and cost.

Conclusion

Although ODL has been widely accepted as an additional method of education delivery, and that it offers benefit in terms of access, equity and flexibility, Brunei Darussalam continues to observe and evaluate how other countries benefit from this.

In addition, issues relating to transnational education, internationalisation of education, including various problems inherent within such a system for example fear towards foreign exploitation and domination should be taken for consideration.

In essence, the success of ODL in other countries cannot simply be assumed directly applicable to Brunei Darussalam since the context and settings are likely to lack suitability and relevance.

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