Providing education to adults through open distance learning

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KUCHING: Education is a lifelong process. One does not stop learning just because one graduates from an institution.

The natural progression of formal education starts from kindergarten and moves up to primary schools and secondary schools. Beyond this point, some choose to go further into colleges and universities before graduating and entering the workforce.

However, working adults can still pursue tertiary education after a stint in the workforce or perhaps take up part-time learning concurrently while working.

This remains Wawasan Open University’s (WOU) main niche, dedicated to providing courses for adults learners who seek tertiary qualifications for professional development and self-enrichment.

Established in 2006, WOU uses flexible approaches to make higher education accessible to all and to create a lifelong learning community for aspiring individuals regardless of their previous educational, ethnic or socio-economic background.

Through its unique open distance learning model, self-paced learning and flexible study pathway, WOU enables working adults to pursue their educational dreams without much disruption to their professional and personal commitments.

During an interview with BizHive Weekly, vice-chancellor Professor Ho Sinn Chye spoke about the growth story of WOU, affirming that education would always be one of the main pillars of any economy.

"Establishing a WOU Regional Centre in Kuching to offer or extend our university’s courses and services to Sarawakian students is a matter of course for WOU," he said.

"In WOU, our operations are underpinned by rigorous standard operation practices and strict adherence to quality assurance. Our centre started operating in Kuching since October 2008 when we took in students for undergraduate courses offered by our School of Business and Administration in January 2010.

"We’ve also enrolled students into our courses offered by the School of Science and Technology in that same year," he added.

"Today, we have students from in and around Kuching who are enrolled in our suite of diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and courses offered by the four schools, including School of Foundation & Liberal Studies and School of Education, Languages and Communications.

"To date, WOU offers over 40 programmes ranging from the sub degree to postgraduate levels in the fields of business, technology, education and liberal studies, including three MBA programmes. WOU produced its first batch of MBA graduates in 2010, and its pioneer batch of Bachelor’s degree students in 2011.

"All its programmes are fully approved by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency. On top of that, 13 of WOU’s programmes have received recognition from the Public Service Department (PAS) following the graduation of its inaugural batch of students.

"In terms of student enrollment numbers, the vice-chancellor revealed that the Kuching Regional Centre portrayed positive performance since Day 1 beyond initial expectations.

"We even have students who are based in Sibu and Miri even though WOU is not physically in Sibu or Miri. This is only possible because of the open distance learning model that we are operating in," he believed. "A large part of our delivery system is conducted online, supported by quality course modules and dedicated online student learning management system.

"Delivering tertiary education through the ODL mode will remain our niche area and focus in the near future," he affirmed.

"However, venturing into the area of conventional face-to-face teaching might be a younger generation of school leavers is also an additional business option that we are currently planning for implementation in the near future.

"Since January 2007, Ho revealed that more than 11,000 students had experienced learning with WOU while some had already graduated as early as 2010.

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"As reflected in our branding image, WOU provides flexible, affordable, and accessible programmes at several academic levels for anyone who wish to pursue tertiary education, and meets government prescribed entry qualifications, especially for those who want to study while still holding on to their jobs.

"Speaking on competition, Ho believed that the challenge existed for education providers to know their own strength, fully understand the needs of customers (prospective students) and come out with education programmes (products) that meet the market demand of the day in a sustainable manner.

"Whichever institution can do this better will stand to gain more and survive over the longer term. Of course factors like customer trust, service satisfaction and quality assurance need to be part of our product planning equation," he concluded.