

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

AeU changing the learning landscape

ESTABLISHED in 2007, Asia e University (AeU) has grown into a leading provider of open and distance learning (ODL) in Asia.

The founding fathers of the university wanted to bring into existence a new approach to tertiary education leveraging on technology to give greater flexibility in learning.

The philosophy is based on the belief that quality education should be made available and accessible to all regardless of demographics.

Today, AeU has an enrolment of more than 22,000 students, and 7,000 graduates have passed through its halls of knowledge.

In just nine years, the university has established a remarkable reputation as a knowledge provider that aims to fulfil the region's human capital needs.

Professor Datuk Dr Ansary Ahmed, an entrepreneur, founder and president of AeU, has more than 40 years of experience in the education market.

In 2010, he received the 'Most Promising Entrepreneur' prize at the Asia-Pacific Entrepreneurship Awards.

Ansary is widely recognised in the industry and before AeU, he had helped establish the Open University Malaysia.

Question: How did AeU come about?

Answer: As an educationist from a traditional university, I saw the difference that education could make in person's life when I was involved in the early days of establishing an open university.

Meeting potential students, especially in small towns and rural areas, made me realise that traditional approach to higher education is only good for a small segment of the society.

By putting together appropriate technologies and new pedagogies, I started on a journey of creating a new business model at an affordable price without compromising on quality.

I went about bringing like-minded people together to change everything from campus based to online classes.

We knew our targeted clients were busy individuals, who yearn to further improve their qualifications.

This was only possible if we embrace the philosophy of anytime and anywhere. We changed the learning landscape by using online platforms and opening small centres nationwide.

As we rolled out AeU in 2008, we deliberately did some unbundling that was never done by traditional education providers.

We were the first movers and shakers on using open source and technologies across borders.

Question: What makes AeU different?

Answer: AeU is unique in many ways. At the International level, AeU is instituted under the auspices of the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and it is supported by 34 ACD countries.

This university was conceptualised based on input gathered from ACD countries to complement their higher



education landscape. It is a university supported by 34 Asian governments.

At the national level, AeU is under the purview of three ministries - the Higher Education, Finance and the Foreign Affairs Ministries.

AeU primarily exists to leverage new media to bring greater access and equity in Asia.

As an institution that propagates lifelong learning, AeU strives to provide opportunities for the masses, particularly working adults.

They have the flexibility of studying at times that suit their lifestyles, thus improving not only themselves, but also their families, professions, and ultimately, their countries.

Question: How does the university work?

Answer: The use of technology is at the very heart of AeU.

For example, with an 'invisible group' of dispersed learners in more than 70 countries, it is easy to lose touch and sight of each of them.

A key contributor to learning success in the ODL is 'connectedness'. We have worked hard to create a sense of connectedness with all our learners.

AeU has established virtual learning spaces to ensure the learners are in contact, not only with their academic facilitators, but also with the university administrators, knowledge centre and as well as with their peers.

Most importantly, we always strive to also inject a human touch into our virtual classrooms.

We transform a cold and isolated virtual classroom by having a cadre of highly-skilled academic facilitators to connect with learners.

The role of the academic facilitators is much more than just instruction and marking assignments; they are also acting as mentors to help them overcome hurdles.

Their virtual presence assures learn-

ers that they are always within sight and mind.

AeU has a MOODLE learning management system platform called myPLS to place all learners, professors, lecturers, academic facilitators and administrators onto one shared space.

With myPLS, class identity and bonding has strengthened significantly. AeU has introduced group discussion for both learner-learner and learner-academic facilitator interactions. The learners can also choose to stay personal, with one to one email, skype or use of social media.

With myPLS, AeU administration is able to use bulletin boards to broadcast news to all learners, post important course information, set up key date reminders on a calendar and turn the site into a virtual space for learners to come together to interact, to pick up course information, and resources that they need.

The platform operates as both push and pull intermediate. For example, assignments are to be dropped in the right spot for marking. Academic facilitators are notified when assignments are submitted, and learners are notified when they are marked.

AeU administration can check assignments submission and marking progress by monitoring the assignments submission button.

The AeU Knowledge Centre is one of the most comprehensive online libraries in the country. Our e-collection covers more than 100,000 e-books, 71,000 e-journals and 1.2 million e-thesis titles with over 600,000 in full text focusing mainly on the subjects offered at AeU. The extensive library resources have been specially designed for the unique needs of busy post-graduate students.

AeU administration always maintains a virtual help desk through our CRM system to respond to our learners' questions.

It also directs queries to the right parties, connects people to cross-fertilise and seeks networked help whenever or wherever such a need arises.

The 360 degrees of support ensures that every learner has a strong encouraging team behind them throughout their whole learning journey.

Question: What are your greatest challenges?

Answer: One of the problems is how to keep busy learners motivated to finish their studies. Making learning fun is a big challenge and the regulations of different countries are a great concern.

We have to patiently educate many regulators and demolish the notion the best higher education is only available at traditional campuses.

The language barrier is another challenge. Obviously it is better to provide education in native languages if one wants to reach out to the majority of learners.

As technology has far outstripped prevailing pedagogic paradigms, we have to develop new pedagogies for the new breed of learners. This is a major challenge as technology is proving to be a major disruptor.

Question: How does AeU stay in the forefront of technological change?

Answer: Technology has a major role to play in helping make AeU relevant to the needs of the 21st century. AeU has always been innovative, adopting and adapting new technologies to better serve our learners.

We are going to do everything in our power to make sure that our main objective stays at the heart of what we do. We are now seeing how technology is becoming increasingly pervasive and disrupting. Technology is also reshaping the structure and form of higher education institutions.

We now see more traditional brick and mortar universities embracing online education. Courses

and subsequent lecturer students interactions are increasingly taking place online. In this regard AeU was a first mover and still have first-mover advantage.

I strongly believe ODL providers like ourselves have helped to change the mindsets and higher education landscape here in Malaysia, making ODL mainstream.

With the developments such as the growth of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) and Open Educational Resources (OER), providers can offer greater opportunities and channels to meet the education needs of citizens in every nation.

The outcome is a greater global equity and access to learning. There is also a shift in the way learners, em-

powered by the new "massifying" technologies, are taking control of their own learning — being proactive managers and indeed producers ie prosumers of their own learning solutions, portfolios and materials.

Technology disruption is inevitable and therefore it is important to understand how to turn these challenges into opportunities. Universities have now a unique opportunity to reengineer higher education to make it ubiquitous.

Technology offers many ways to improve teaching, increase independent learning by students and enrich the learning experience. Most important of all, it offers a means for real world problems to be worked upon by creative young minds with guidance coming from a borderless academic fraternity. Online partnerships with industry, government, NGOs and other bodies to better understand the needs of society and industry will lead to better designed curricula and learning.

I strongly believe that AeU is well placed to seize these opportunities and be a leader in reengineering higher education. We have developed specific strategies to remain at the forefront and we refer this as our 'AeU 2.0'.

Question: What do you think the higher education landscape will look like in 10 years' time?

Answer: I am a strong believer in providing choices to the learners. I think the learners today want variety to suit their lifestyles.

Hence, the higher education landscape has to be diverse as it is in developed nations.

There will be for free universities, for the masses universities and elite universities, each with their own unique value propositions.

There will be learners who prefer face to face while others want blended or online learning. Some universities will still be didactic while others will become work-based learning.

Some will be hybrid. The notion of quality and fit for purpose will also evolve and universities will be forced to change their price structure or their offerings to meet these new meanings. Technology, too, will impact universities as redefine their role within 21st century life.

Students of tomorrow will want flexible, mobile-enabled personalised learning experiences that are as compelling as film or theatre. Universities need to think carefully about how to develop and deliver their courses, making each learning experience truly memorable and life-changing.

In short, I'm absolutely convinced that fundamental changes to the notion of university education will be happening soon.

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