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Beware fake ODL courses

Better late than never: that is the opportunity distance learning gives working adults who believe in lifelong learning. However, distance learning can be a bane if a wrong choice is made. It is up to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and distance-learning providers to come to the rescue.

THERE are many terms being used: online learning, e-learning, open learning, and distance learning. The Malaysian public needs to be made aware of what each term means.

Distance learning is basically any kind and form of education delivered to the student who is not physically on site. The media by which the teaching is conveyed can be of any form.

Open learning is defined as an approach to learning that gives students flexibility and choice over what, when, where, how and at what pace to learn. It often includes aspects of e-learning.

For online learning, all the teaching-learning processes are done entirely through the Internet. This includes reading material, submission of assignments and teacher-student contact.

On the other hand, e-learning encompasses usage of compact discs and other technologies to aid the teaching-learning process.

It can thus be said that distance learning and open learning cover the widest scope and are similar in meaning. "Open" is used to give emphasis that the courses are available to students of all ages and backgrounds, in the true spirit of lifelong learning.

With the growth of information technology, Malaysians now have access to hundreds of open and distance learning (ODL) courses offered by local and foreign institutions.

Currently, there are only about 10 institutions in Malaysia offering ODL courses. Three are purely ODL operators - Open University

Malaysia, University Tun Abdul Razak, and Wawasan Open University. The rest are public and private universities such as UUM, UPM, UiTM, International Medical University and International Islamic University, whose faculties offer some courses through the ODL mode.

The choices can be bewildering. How then do we protect Malaysians from fly-by-night operators? This is when the MQA comes in.

The MQA has accredited some courses offered by local ODL providers, but should also look into doing so for foreign operators. Accreditation is a way of verifying that the overseas institutions are legitimate and provide quality service and education.

Perhaps the Higher Education Ministry could look into providing a list of operators that are already approved and accredited by their respective ministries of education. This could save Malaysians much headache and cash.

As many courses are unavailable locally, I do not see any reason why Malaysians should be deprived of safely accessing courses provided by foreign operators. Local private institutions of higher learning can act as regional centres providing tutorial and administrative support.

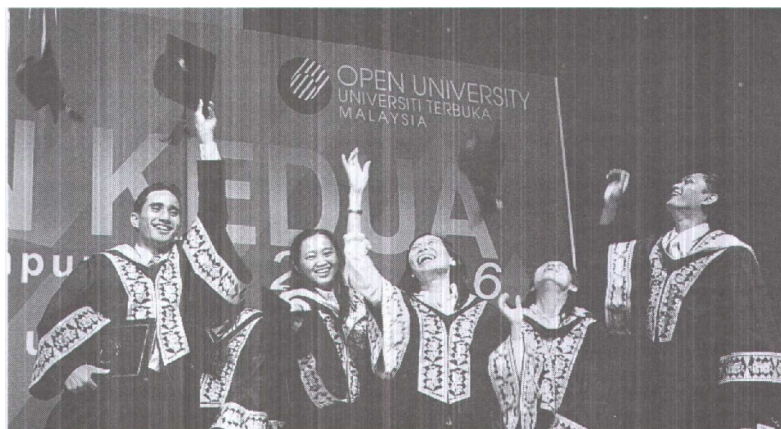
In the long run, foreign operators may not be a competitive threat to local operators because some courses require practical or lab sessions, which must be done on site or under an instructor's supervision.

Local providers would gain an advantage in providing such courses. Besides, foreign courses are generally more expensive than local ones due to the exchange rate.

However, fees for ODL courses are still generally higher than those for fulltime courses. It is ironic, considering ODL operators should have lower operational costs since they do not require a large campus to accommodate students.

It would be best if a control mechanism is set up to safeguard Malaysians from being taken for a ride by fake online and distance education providers. Local ones could make their courses more attractive than foreign ones by giving competitive fees.

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Delighted: File picture showing Open University Malaysia graduates celebrating on convocation day.