OPEN University Malaysia has always championed accessible learning, and the ICI conference is yet another platform to spread awareness about the importance of education that is available to all who need it. Acting as host this year, OUM is hoping for a gathering rich in knowledge diversity with the help of its conference partners, Delta University for Science and Technology in Egypt and Eszterhazy Karoly College, Hungary.

The ICI 12 (International Conference on Information) is an annual event, showcasing the latest in classroom technology from researchers and educators. The conference has a dual purpose, according to OUM’s Senior Vice President, Professor Dr Mansor Fadzil. “We want to promote collaboration among the partner institutions, and at the same time we want to share with the public the developments that have occurred in the teaching and learning fields,” he says.

ACCESSIBLE THEMES: The conference theme this year is ‘Learning Unlimited’, a catchy tagline that embodies OUM’s aspirations. Developments in technology have played an important role in education, as a tool to increase the dissemination of knowledge to students or as a classroom aid.

“Through this conference, we particularly want to emphasise learning and the potential for limitless ways in which you can go about learning,” Professor Mansor explains. “The fact is that educators are leveraging heavily on technology to make knowledge unlimited, with particular focus on mobile technology, and the conference is a focal point in exchanging ideas and developments.”

To stimulate discourse on the wide range of topics under unlimited learning, OUM has prepared several sub-themes that have striking relevance to the focal topic. Under the Transforming Learning via Social Media sub-theme, Professor Mansor hopes that educational institutions will share how they use social media to capture the attention of their students and get them involved in their subjects, and the ways social media itself can be used as a tool to convey knowledge to learners.

Social media applications like Facebook and Twitter have gained a reputation for frivolity, with the general perception being that its main use is for chatting with friends and uploading pictures. These very attributes of social media, though, make it an ideal tool to stimulate communication between learners and act as a public forum to ease the exchange of ideas. This is in contrast with manual communications where channels may not always be open, and lecturers and other students may not be contactable for further discussion and understanding.

This leads into the next sub-theme, Engaging Learners to Produce Learning, where student-engaging activities are explored to produce effective learning. “There will certainly be a variety of applications,” says Professor Mansor. “Different people have different experiences and that is what we want to know about. When the researchers and educators share their papers with us, we hope they can share what sort of pedagogy they employ in the content, in the support materials to make sure that it produces learning at the end of the day.”

“The future of learning and the direction in which researchers foresee the tools of academia taking another issue that will be discussed at the conference. ‘We want to know what might happen in the next three to five years – after all, IT evolves very quickly – and how it can be integrated into the idea of ubiquitous learning,’ explains Professor Mansor. ‘I think ubiquitous learning is the next wave in education. By leveraging on technology, accessibility and content we will be able to realise it, and we need to train academicians to be ready for this. We need to also train the students to be aware, to be ready, and also to embrace new technology coming our way.’

The advent of Open Education Resources (OER) has initiated the movement for truly accessible knowledge. OER is about making content available online at no charge, or only the price of the access fee,” Professor Mansor says. “Good quality content that is actually used in classrooms, can be put up online for anyone to access. Of course, if they want certification, it would be necessary for them to register and pay for a regular course, but otherwise it is accessible to anyone with an internet connection.”

OER has successfully created ‘independent learners’, people who absorb knowledge from the materials available online to enrich their understanding on a variety of subjects. A movement that has been gaining momentum, OER has been offered online by universities in Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada, and many countries have formed partnerships to provide free learning opportunities through an online portal.

OER is one of the major steps in truly democratising higher education; with collaborations between countries and learners from all over the world, the physical barriers to education are being crossed over and over again.

ENGAGING ITINERARY: The ICI 12 will span over two days, on 12 and 13 Dec, and will be held at the Seri Pacific Hotel. To complement the lineup of the central themes, OUM has invited three keynote speakers: Professor Asha Kanwar, President of the Commonwealth
of Learning, Professor Dr Zoraini Wati Abas of OUM and Professor Dr Mohamed Amin Embi, Deputy Director (e-Learning) of the Centre for Academic Advancement, UKM.

"I believe that through this conference, local as well as international participants can network, share ideas and experiences to promote this idea of learning unlimited, using social media, and the idea of OER," avers Professor Mansor. "It’s a global, borderless world and we shouldn’t limit ourselves. This conference is the ideal platform to exchange experiences and ideas among the community while spreading awareness to the public.

For further information and paper submissions, log on to icil2.oum.edu.my or email: icil2@oum.edu.my

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Professor Dr Mansor Fadzil, OUM’s Senior Vice President