Using Technology To Enhance Equal Opportunities For Access To Higher Education In Oman

The Ministry of Higher Education established the Higher Education Admission Center (HEAC) in 2005. The Center facilitates the processing of applications for 1st year admission to all public & private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman. It also deals with applications for external scholarships to enable Omani students to study abroad. The HEAC system offers a high degree of convenience to applicants in applying to HEIs as it uses the internet and SMS messaging systems. This paper highlights how the system has helped to enhance equal opportunities for access to higher education for all students in Oman and especially for those students from certain disadvantaged backgrounds.

Higher Education System in Oman

There are 32 publicly higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman. Places in all these public HEIs are available free of charge to Omani nationals and admission is based on academic merit. In addition, the government awards external scholarships for undergraduate studies abroad. As well as the public HEIs there are 23 private HEIs. The public & private higher education enrolled 66,074 students, of which 52% are females. The various institutions in the higher education system are governed by a number of different ministries.

Higher Education Institutions in Oman 2006/2007

Private Institution 23
Public Institution 32
Colleges 19
Universities 4
Specialized Institutions 17
College 14
University 1

Multiple Application Admission System (MAAS)

As there are more than one ministry governed the higher education system, this led to a multiple applications admission system. The students need to apply repeatedly to public HEIs in a sequence following time table over period of time. If a student did not get offer from the first public HEI, he/she will apply to the next one and so on. In case he/she did not get offer in one of the public HEIs, then applies to private HEIs. According to this system the students and their parents had to make the journey to the capital more than once to apply to various HEIs. This meant that they should be able to cover the cost of repeated traveling from their home to the capital to follow their applications; otherwise they will give up after the second application, and loose their opportunities to enroll in higher education. The MAAS has negative impact on the right of higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

Electronic Admission System (EAS)

The Ministry of Higher Education established the Higher Education Admission Center (HEAC) in 2005. The purpose of the Center is to facilitate applications for 1st year admission to all public & private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman as well as the allocation of internal and external scholarships. HEAC is required to process applications centrally and to deal with them in an efficient and fair manner.

The HEAC took the opportunities created by the availability of the most modern information and computing technology to manage the process of application and admission to higher education. The system is entirely electronic and paper application is not accepted. Using this system, students can submit a single application over the internet from their home or school, or by SMS through their mobile phone. If they can apply for up to 30 programmes from all those available in all of the HEIs, placing their programme choices in their own order of preference. The closing date for receipt of applications is 1st June.

After the results of the national secondary level examinations are released, students are given an opportunity to amend their programme choices again, using the internet or SMS.

All offers of places are sent to students by email or SMS and on the same day which is nationally advertised in advance. In addition offers are presented online at the HEAC website www.heac.gov.om. Students must indicate acceptance of their offer electronically and by a specified reply date. If they do not accept the offer, the place is immediately offered to the next appropriate student on the order of merit list for that programme.

The HEAC has an Independent Appeals Commission to which students may be referred by applicants who believe that they have been treated unfairly, and whose complaints have not been resolved by HEAC.

In 2006 the HEAC launched its online system for the first time. To ensure the availability of computers and the internet to all students, the HEAC, used schools and higher education institutions over the country as admission centers. Teachers were trained in the use of the system and were available in each of these centers to help and to guide students to use the online system.

In 2007, the second year of operation, in order to avoid any problems arising from heavy traffic on the internet, HEAC enhanced the SMS messaging system so that students could deal with the entire application, offer and acceptance processes from their mobile phone. Mobile phones are used by 90% of the Omani population.

The SMS facility was very successful, with 80% of students using it to confirm their acceptance of the offer of places. While a number of countries have an online application system using the internet, HEAC is the first to use SMS extensively in the entire process for admission to Higher Education that it can totally replace the use of the internet.

The Impact of EAS System

The introduction of the HEAC electronic admission system has been very successful in a number of ways. Obviously, it has made the process of application much easier and less expensive than previously. There is no longer any need to travel very long distances to submit an application. In the HEAC system, all offers to which an applicant becomes entitled are issued automatically; the applicant is not required to do anything after submitting his list of programmes choices.

The centralisation of the process has been of great benefit itself but the development of the SMS system has complemented it and made the whole process exceptionally easy for students and their parents.

In addition, there has been a very positive social impact arising from the introduction of the system and how, as people become even more familiar with the system, this benefit will increase. For example, the new system has enhanced equal opportunities for access to higher education for three categories of students in particular. These are Students from poor families. Students from isolated or disadvantages areas, such as Aswad; and female students from the interior of the country who traditionally do not travel alone.

Some data derived from the HEAC records may illustrate the changes which have occurred.

FIGURE (1)

The number of female students and students from low income family admitted in 2006 and 2007

FIGURE (2)

Percentage of increase in the number of admitted student by region in 2007 compared to 2006

Lessons for others

The HEAC methods have been proven to be very successful, both technically and socially. As well as the use of the internet. The SMS messaging methodology, which HEAC has pioneered is equally suitable whose access to the Internet may not be widespread.

As mobile phone usage is widespread, adopting SMS messaging to apply to higher education is an alternative tool for countries experiencing challenges with providing internet service.

The HEAC approach of early application before examination results are available, while still allowing an opportunity to change afterwards, gives students plenty of time to make the right choice of their higher education programmes.

The HEAC method of allocating places is very adaptable and can accommodate almost all methods of assessment.

Finally, in only its second year of operation, the HEAC system won international recognition by being awarded the World Student Award for 2007 for world’s best e-content.

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