

## Open and Distance eLearning in Asia: Country Initiatives and Institutional Cooperation for the Transformation of Higher Education in the Region

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to describe the situation of higher education in Asia including the challenges it faced as well as the open and distance elearning initiatives by different countries and universities. Data gathering was done through review of online documents and websites as well as documentation of the different initiatives especially by the member institutions of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU). Descriptions of open education practices on MOOCs, OERs, and open access publications were presented and their potential to transform higher education in the region was discussed. Challenges encountered in the implementation of ODeL programs were articulated as well as some suggestions on how to address them.

**Keywords:** open distance elearning (ODeL); Asia; higher education; MOOCs; open universities; open education practices

### Introduction

Asia consists of 48 countries, 36 of which had been specifically classified as developing countries based on World Bank Country Classifications<sup>i</sup>. The region is home to about 60% of the world's population and ranks first among the regions of the world in terms of population. The population median<sup>ii</sup> age is 30.7. During the last 10 years, enrolment in higher education in Asia has been observed to increase by over 50% (Mok, 2016). Dunrong (2015), on the other hand, also observed that "Ongoing population growth in many developing countries of the region leads to a steady increase in the number of young people. At the same time, the demand for higher education continues to expand" (p. 14).

This growth in the population and the demand for higher education in Asia is coupled with the projection that "... the 21st century will be the Asian century" (Mahbubani and Chye (2015) as cited by ICEF Monitor, 2015) which, as these authors also said "is overdue and inevitable".

UNESCO (UNESCO, 1988 as cited by Songkaeo, and Yeong, 2016) defines higher education as:

...all types of education (academic, professional, technical, artistic, pedagogical, long distance learning, etc.) provided by universities, technological institutes, teacher training colleges, etc., which are normally intended for students having completed a secondary education, and whose educational objective is the acquisition of a title, a grade, certificate, or diploma of higher education. (p. 3)



This definition mirrors how the different cultures in Asia see higher education, which can also explain the surge in the demand for access accompanying the increase in the age group who should be availing themselves of higher education: a goal and the means to success. This is very much reflected in the statements below by Breitenstein (2013):

... the difference between Asian and American education systems is cultural. Throughout much of Asia, education is seen as the only path to success. Parental demands, fear of failure, competition, and pride are fueling Asia's academic ascension. Simply put, children in Asia study with a purpose.

Elaborating on the role of education, Breitenstein (2013), further said that education is the "driver of social mobility" which implies economic success as well.

The role of higher education in national development has been widely recognized, especially in terms of teacher training to improve the quality of education and graduates who will man and run the industries, govern the nation, and push forward innovations through research and creative thinking (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

This paper aims to 1) describe the challenges faced by higher education in Asia; 2) discuss the different open distance elearning (ODEL) initiatives by the different countries and universities; and 3. draw insights on how the ODeL initiatives can pave the way for higher education transformation in the region.

Data and information presented in this paper were gathered through a combination of the following methodologies: content review of relevant documents, resources and previous studies made available online including websites of organizations; and process documentation of the various initiatives by the members of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU).

## **Discussion**

### **Higher Education in Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Higher education in Asia faces a lot of challenges especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Some of these challenges are as follows:

#### ***1. Projected education needs worldwide and in the region***

In addition to what has already been observed during the last 10 years or so, there has been and there will continue to be a tremendous increase in the demand for higher education in the coming years. In 2018, 9.4% of the Asian population are in the age range of 15-24, the age profile who are and who should be in higher or tertiary education. The number is projected to increase steadily over the next years to 14.4% of the total population by 2030<sup>iii</sup> This projection implies the population sector which should be provided higher education opportunities in the region.

This was further emphasized by the International Council on Open and Distance Education (ICDE) (2015) which highlighted the need to respond to the recognized education needs globally, of which, Asia, as the biggest region in terms of population needs to consider as well in addition to its responsibility to contribute to the global agenda. ICDE noted the need to shape the post-2015 agenda and address the issues of "access, equity and quality learning outcomes" and respond to the burgeoning number of students enrolling in higher education, which is projected to be more than 400 million by

2030.<sup>iv</sup> This implies a projection of almost 58 million to be catered to by Asian higher education institutions, which number about 6580. <sup>v</sup> There is, therefore, this question of whether these higher education institutions will be able to accommodate the projected increase in enrollment following the current system of delivering instructional content, especially in brick and mortar settings.

## ***2. Rapidly changing work environment, the rapidly changing skills requirements by the industry and the need for strong academia-industry partnership***

It is often said that we are now at the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution or a technological revolution whose “scale, scope and complexity will result in transformation that will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before” (Schwab, 2016). Schwab (2015) described the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution as follows:

Neither technology nor the disruption that comes with it is an exogenous force over which humans have no control. All of us are responsible for guiding its evolution, in the decisions we make on a daily basis as citizens, consumers, and investors. We should thus grasp the opportunity and power we have to shape the Fourth Industrial Revolution and direct it toward a future that reflects our common objectives and values.

To do this, however, we must develop a comprehensive and globally shared view of how technology is affecting our lives and reshaping our economic, social, cultural, and human environments. There has never been a time of greater promise, or one of greater potential peril. Today’s decision-makers, however, are too often trapped in traditional, linear thinking, or too absorbed by the multiple crises demanding their attention, to think strategically about the forces of disruption and innovation shaping our future.

In the end, it all comes down to people and values. We need to shape a future that works for all of us by putting people first and empowering them.

This characterization of the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution has implications on how higher education should respond in terms of the skills and talent of graduates it will produce and how the higher education system should work with other stakeholders.

Specific for Asia, it has been projected that by 2050, “the world will see a dramatic shift in global economic power away from advanced countries and toward Asia” (ICEF Monitor, 2015). Bhandari (2015 as cited by ICEF Monitor (2015)) further argues that the dynamics in economic growth is “reflected in the landscape of higher education.... especially at a time when economic growth in many rapidly developing Asian economies is linked to knowledge production, advanced skills, and the rising demand for higher education.”

One aspect of higher education transformation is in terms of the relevance of curriculum and instruction (ADB, 2011) to the current context of industry which further implies the need for a strong academia-industry partnership. Higher education institutions cannot isolate themselves from the real world of work which will be the destination of their graduates.

## ***3. Student mobility***

It is no longer unusual to hear of tertiary students needing to relocate or change home base, especially in Asia where the workforce can easily transfer from one country to the other.

Yung Chi Hou et al. (2017), observed that “student mobility within Asia has been driven and encouraged due to economic growth, national competitiveness, and regional development in the early

twenty-first century. One manifestation of the trend is a significant increase in the number of students moving within and amongst Asian campuses, such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries” (p. 12).

Higher-education institutions should be able to address the concern of students transferring from one country to the other, usually as a result of their parents transferring residences as a result of the demand for work.

#### **4. *Redefining 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills***

Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills has become a buzz phrase, especially among academic institutions, in their efforts to respond to the fast-changing needs of life and work environments. However, a deeper look into these skills and what exactly are needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century points to the need to include ethical values, digital citizenship, independent learning, a sense of responsibility, effective time management and an integrated way of learning.

#### **5. *Massification of higher education impacting on the quality of instruction***

With the belief that increasing higher education enrolment would “improve the quality of the population and enhance national competitiveness in the globalizing world” massification of higher education in Asia has been observed from the 1980s onwards (Mok & Jiang, 2016). This massification, however, impacts on the quality of education, given the limited funding and resources allotted to education especially among the developing nations. This limited funding affects school facilities and learning materials, as well as teachers’ qualifications and credentials which should be continuously improved through continuing professional development.

#### **6. *Equity of access and learning outcomes***

Together with the concern of making higher education accessible, the equity of learning outcomes should also be ensured. Every learner should have an equal opportunity to learn what is being taught and achieve the learning goals set for each of the courses that he/she has enrolled in. This can be a function of access to quality learning materials and relevant resources and activities associated with learning and the applications of such learnings even after the completion of formal education.

#### **7. *Social responsibility***

The role of higher education institutions is not confined within its bricks and mortar structure. They have and should practice social responsibility not only to their direct stakeholders (students and parents) but also to the community where they are operating and society in general or what is now known as University Social Responsibility (USR), an adaptation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Reiser (2008 as cited by Vasilescu, et. al., 2010) defines the USR concept as “a policy of ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labour and environmental impacts produced by the university, in an interactive dialogue with society to promote a sustainable human development” (p. 4178).

#### **8. *Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)***

Education should not operate in silos. While there is a specific mission attached to educational institutions, they should also function with consideration of what is happening with the rest of the

world. The role of education in achieving the SDGs should be recognized given that education, especially open education, should be at the core of each SDG. Results of a survey conducted by UNESCO (2017) show that:

... universities increasingly collaborate on sustainable development issues, engage with sustainable development networks and look for examples on how [they] can integrate the different SDGs into the curriculum, research, campus management, etc.

This action has become part of the expectation for universities to which they should also respond.

### **Open and Distance eLearning (ODeL) in Asia**

Most open and distance eLearning initiatives in Asia are undertaken by open universities operating in the region. Jones, et. al. (2009), in an attempt to define or describe an open university, offered the following:

...open universities are political institutions concerned with broad issues that the higher education system cannot or will not deal with; such as building capacity, individual opportunity and social justice; encouraging change in the higher education system and nation-building. If these are the broad aims then each particular Open University also has its own mission related to the local political and social context in which it works. (p. 2)

Most open universities offer their programmes and courses in the distance education mode, which is characterised by the geographical separation of learners from the teachers and the university. This mode of instructional delivery further enhanced the capability of open universities to practice open learning and be more inclusive and accessible compared to conventional or residential universities. The geographical separation is bridged by using technology in the delivery of instructional services as well as learner support. In Asia, more than 70 institutions offer programs in the distance education mode of instruction. These institutions are present in about 20 countries and are either operating as stand-alone universities or as part of a conventional academic institution. Further, these institutions/universities operate at a wide range of scales/levels. Likewise, their systems of operations vary in terms of how instruction is delivered to the students from residential open university to fully online or distance eLearning operations. Indira Gandhi Open University (IGNOU) in India which is considered to be the world's largest university, for instance, boasts of over three million students as of 2017 (Noronha, 2017). The University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) has only just over 4,000 students enrolled in its degree programmes but is operating in a full distance eLearning mode.

In addition to IGNOU, seven other mega open universities are operating in Asia. Table 1 shows the mega open universities in the region and their respective enrollment figures.

**Table 1. Mega open universities in Asia and their enrollment figures<sup>vi</sup>**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Founded</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>
<u>Indira Gandhi National Open University</u>	<u>Delhi, India</u>	1985	4,000,000+
<u>Anadolu University</u>	<u>Eskisehir, Turkey</u>	1958	1,974,343
<u>Allama Iqbal Open University</u>	<u>Islamabad, ICT, Pakistan</u>	1974	1,326,948
<u>Payame Noor University</u>	<u>Tehran, Iran</u>	1987	800,000
<u>Bangladesh Open University</u>	<u>Gazipur, Bangladesh</u>	1992	650,000
<u>Dr. B R Ambedkar Open University</u>	<u>Telangana, India</u>	1982	450,000
<u>Universitas Terbuka</u>	<u>Jakarta, Indonesia</u>	1984	300,000
<u>Korea National Open University</u>	<u>South Korea</u>	1972	210,978

All these open universities are members of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) and are part of this big network with members collaborating to push the frontier of distance education and open learning in the region.

### **Regional Cooperation Among Open Universities in Asia**

1. AAOU Inter-University Staff Exchange Fellowship Programme. Established in 1997, this programme aims to foster the exchange of knowledge and experience in open and distance education and to enhance the capacities of member institutions through mutual assistance and partnership. Any AAOU member institution (the donor) may contribute to the programme by offering one or more short-term fellowship(s) to staff from other member institutions (the recipients) to spend up to one month at the donor institution in order to receive training, carry out an academic exchange or undertake a collaborative research project. This programme also allows staff of participating institutions to observe and be immersed with the operations of other open universities, view their facilities, and see how they are operating and being managed. All member institutions are welcome to participate in this capacity-building initiative<sup>vii</sup>. Some member institutions participating in this programme are: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU), Korea National Open University (KNOU), Shanghai Open University (SOU), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Universitas Terbuka (UT), Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), and Wawasan Open University (WOU). This programme often results in research collaborations, joint publications, and seminar series, among other benefits.
2. Curricular Program/Course Development. Five open universities in Asia worked together and provided a model of collaboration for the purpose of developing a curricular program that is of interest to all participating universities. The five open universities, who adopted the name OU5, are UPOU, UT, STOU, Open University Malaysia (OUM), and Hanoi Open University (HOU). They worked together to develop the curriculum and learning modules for

the ASEAN Studies programme. This collaboration resulted in the development and offering of the Graduate Certificate in ASEAN Studies and Master in ASEAN Studies by UPOU.

3. **Research Collaborations.** In addition to the usual research collaboration being undertaken under the AAOU Inter-University Staff Exchange Fellowship Programme, other research collaborations among AAOU member institutions include ASEAN studies like labor migration and institutional research focusing on the various aspects of distance education implementation and open-learning initiatives. Some of the collaborative research undertaken include a DE learners' importance-satisfaction survey, which looked into what DE components are considered important by DE learners and how satisfied those learners are with how these factors are being implemented by the academic institution where they are enrolled, employers' satisfaction with the performance of DE graduates in their companies, attrition in DE, and assessment practices in DE. Cross-country comparisons were done in these studies to come up with regional perspectives on these various aspects of implementing distance education programs. Current research collaborations tackle perception of quality and the credit transfer of MOOCs and a feasibility study on the implementation of accreditation system for open universities in the region.
4. **Knowledge Exchange through Academic Conferences.** Exchange of research results and best practices among open universities in the region is facilitated through the holding of academic conferences, as a group of open universities, through the AAOU Annual Conferences. Many open universities also hold international conferences which are supported by, or participated in, by other open universities, e.g. the International Conference on Open and Innovative Education organized annually by Hong Kong Open University, and the International Conference on Open and Distance eLearning by the UP Open University or jointly, like the International Conference on Scientific Research: Human Resource Development, which was organized by HOU and STOU in 2015 and which was supported by other open universities in the region.

### **Open Education Initiatives in Asia**

The Cape Town Declaration on Open Education<sup>viii</sup> in 2007 described open education as *“not limited to just open educational resources. It also draws upon open technologies that facilitate collaborative, flexible learning and the open sharing of teaching practices that empower educators to benefit from the best ideas of their colleagues. It may also grow to include new approaches to assessment, accreditation and collaborative learning”*. Opensource.com<sup>ix</sup> added that *“proponents of open education believe everyone in the world should have access to high quality educational experiences and resources”*.

Open universities, the way most of them are operating in Asia, unfortunately, are not totally open in the sense of the definition of open education. Many still require payment of tuition fees from the students themselves or through some form of scholarship, and have admission requirements, qualifications, or some schedules to follow in an academic or school year which serve as barriers to education and learning for many. In recent years, many open universities in Asia adopted various forms of open education:

1. *Offering of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)*. The offering of MOOCs also found its way into many Asian countries with the involvement of both residential and open universities. Many initiatives started as far back as 2013, the year considered to be “Anti-MOOC” with what Watters (2013) described as “sliding down that Gartner Hype Cycle from the “Peak of Inflated Expectations” and into the “Trough of Disillusionment”. This indicates that in the region, MOOCs present much potential in terms of what they can offer to address the various challenges faced by education systems in Asia. The early initiatives witnessed some countries developing national MOOC platforms where their universities could offer their MOOCs, while other universities started by offering their MOOCs through the major providers like Coursera, edX and OpenLearn. Among the national platforms developed were: K-MOOC in Korea; jMOOC in Japan, ThaiMOOC in Thailand; OpenLearning.com for Malaysia; University Joint Alliance Platform in China; Swayam in India; and the MODEl for the Philippines. These national platforms also provide venues for universities to collaborate in the offering of open online courses that will serve the learners in their respective countries; facilitate monitoring of quality of this open learning mechanism, and to push for national policies on the recognition of learnings obtained from completion of these open online courses. Some of these MOOC initiatives in the region are as follows:

- Malaysia MOOCs<sup>x</sup>: Malaysia made the initial steps towards the formulation of national policies for the awarding of credits to MOOCs towards completion of a degree. Malaysia MOOCs was launched in September 2014 with four pilot MOOCs and the involvement of four public universities as content developers. These four MOOCs were based on the four compulsory core courses that undergraduate students should take (Ibrahim and Rahim, 2018). Shahar (2016) described the initiative in Malaysia as follows:

... the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) has been given the mandate to implement the 'MOOCs plus credit recognition and transfer' initiative, which would enable all MOOCs courses from Malaysia and abroad to be registered into the Malaysia's MOOC platform and be given credit". The purpose is to “encourage flexible learning among students, reduce the duplication of learning and recogni[z]e the lessons and experiences gained outside the conventional classroom”.

- India MOOC<sup>xi</sup>. India MOOC was also launched in 2014. As mentioned, the national platform is SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds) which also implies self-learning (Pushpanadham, 2015). India’s recognition of learning through MOOCs is implied in one of the recommendations contained in the proposed National Policy on Education 2016<sup>xii</sup> that provides direct reference to MOOCs as follows:

Open Direct Learning through dual mode universities and through MOOCs should be accorded appropriate priority because of India’s existing and latent strength in terms of IT capability, probability of near-term expansion of IT connectivity and enormous interest evinced by leading Universities and Institutions in promoting ODL education.

- China MOOC. Liangyu (2018) described MOOCs in China as follows:

MOOCs started to become popular in China in 2013, and the courses often benefit those living in remote areas. The Ministry of Education said there are more than 10 MOOC platforms in China, and over 460 universities and colleges have introduced more than 3,200 online courses through those platforms, with more than 55 million viewers.

The China College MOOC, which was established in 2014 by China's Higher Education Press and Internet giant Netease became one of the largest platforms for MOOCs in China together with [www.icourse163.org](http://www.icourse163.org), which hosts more than 120 universities and colleges and offers 1,822 courses ranging from professional curricula in higher education, vocational education, innovation and entrepreneurship (Liangyu, 2018). XuetangX<sup>xiii</sup>, on the other hand, China's first and biggest MOOC platform, was founded in 2013 by the Tsinghua University under the supervision of the China Ministry of Education Research. It is considered to be the fastest growing MOOC platform with 11 million users (Shah, 2017), more than 500 partners, and hosting more than 1400 courses.

According to Ying (2015), MOOCs in China “can be looked upon as a technological innovation useful in solving problems related to education and higher education [in China], and that the value of MOOCs to open universities comes mainly in the form of educational equality and resource sharing”.

- Japan MOOC<sup>xiv</sup>. MOOC in Japan started in 2013 with two major initiatives as described by Yamada (2015). The first initiative was when top-class universities of the country joined international consortia, such as Coursera and edX, for their MOOC projects. The second initiative was the launch of the Japan Massive Open Online Course (JMOOC) Consortium in November 2013 as a regional MOOC consortium. It should be noted that JMOOC hosts not only MOOCs offered by universities but also by companies. JMOOC has 92 members offers 140 courses and lists more than 500,000 students. JMOOC also has three official platforms described by Yamada (2015) as follows:

JMOOC had three official platforms, “gacco”, “OpeN Learning Japan”, and “OUJ MOOC”. “gacco” (<http://gacco.org/>) is an open edX-based platform managed by NTT DoCoMo and NTT Knowledge Square. “OUJ MOOC” is a multimedia e-textbook taste platform developed by CCC-TIES Consortium and managed by OUJ. “OpeN Learning Japan” (<http://open.netlearning.co.jp/>) is a domestic integrated learning support platform managed by NetLearning, Inc. The member institution which plans to launch a MOOC from JMOOC can choose one of the official MOOC platforms in considering the compatibility between course content and course management platform. They consider multiple platform strategy induces diversified learning strategies and pedagogies to cope with a wider range of potential learners.

- Korea MOOC<sup>xv</sup>. K-MOOC was initiated by NILE (National Institute for Lifelong Education) with 10 Korean universities in October 2015 (Lee, 2015). It lists 342 courses and 34 partners and working on a vision of “a balance of practical opportunities in higher education and innovation of university education through open higher education system”.

- Indonesia MOOC. Indonesia has its IndonesiaX<sup>xvi</sup>, an Open edX MOOC platform, which hosts the MOOCs initiatives from seven partner universities. After its launch in 2015, it has attracted more than 45,000 course registrations.
  - Philippines MOOC. The PhMOOC<sup>xvii</sup> was initiated by the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) in 2013 through the university's uLearn Project (dela Pena-Bandalaria & Alfonso, 2015). It started with the offering of one course, "Developing mobile Apps Using the Android Platform", which was developed in partnership with the leading telecommunications company in the country. PhMOOC was envisioned as addressing the following: providing free learning opportunities to those who want to upgrade their knowledge and skills for employment and/or career advancement; addressing the manpower needs of major industries in the country by offering MOOCs that would develop the skills and knowledge required; and helping improve the country's quality of education through free training of teachers and making available the MOOCs as OERs which can be used in a blended mode of instruction. In 2018, five MOOC Certification programmes were started through the MODEL platform: Child Rights Protection and Promotion; eFilipiniana; eService Management Program; Teaching in Open Distance eLearning; and Technology for Teaching and Learning. The MOOC Certification program requires the learner to take a set of MOOCs (3-4) and pass an assessment. As of 2018, the MODEL platform lists 47 courses. In addition to UPOU, other MOOC providers in the Philippines include SEAMEO-INNOTECH and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA).
  - Thailand MOOC. ThaiMOOC is the official MOOC platform for Thailand, which was launched on 2 March 2017 during the 1<sup>st</sup> Asia-Pacific MOOCs Stakeholders Summit held in Thailand (Shah, 2017). The Ministry of Education provided funds amounting to 195 million Baht to members of the Thai university network who were willing to create and develop the open content needed. The ThaiMOOC also uses You Tube for its video materials (Nasongkhia, et. al., 2015).
  - Asian MOOCs<sup>xviii</sup>. Asian MOOCs is an initiative of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) in 2014 which started with the formation of a Task Force that will work for the promotion of Open Licensing and the development of MOOCs in the region (UNESCO, 2014). The Task Force consolidated the MOOC initiatives of all AAOU member institutions and created the landing page (Asian MOOCs Portal) to increase the visibility of these MOOCs . The Task Force also developed the official platform for the Asian MOOCs, the Asian MOOCs Learning Portal<sup>xix</sup> , which can host the MOOCs by member universities who do not have their own MOOC platform. Through a meta data harvester app, information about the MOOCs offerings by AAOU member universities are automatically reflected in the Asian MOOC Portal.
2. **Open Educational (OER) Repositories.** Another initiative in open and distance elearning is the development of OER repositories. Wawasan Open University (WOU) has its "Online Collection of University's OERs, learning objects metadata and other learning materials output". The repository holds the WOU's contribution to the wealth of Open Educational

Resources and is powered by WEKO, a homegrown repository software developed by the National Institute of Informatics (NII), Japan. The UPOU also has a repository of the OERs it developed – the UPOU Networks<sup>xx</sup>.

- 3. Open Access Publications.** Open Access publications are “*freely available online to all at no cost and with limited restrictions with regard reuse. The unrestricted distribution of research is especially important for **authors** (as their work gets seen by more people), **readers** (as they can access and build on the most recent work in their field) and **funders** (as the work they fund has broader impact by being able to reach a wider audience<sup>xxi</sup>. Some examples of open access publications include: the *AAOU Journal*<sup>xxii</sup>; the *ASEAN Journal of Open and Distance Learning*<sup>xxiii</sup>; the eJournals of Universitas Terbuka<sup>xxiv</sup>; and the *International Journal on Open and Distance eLearning*<sup>xxv</sup>.*

### **Transforming Higher Education in Asia through ODeL**

The challenges faced by higher education in Asia necessitate not just surface changes but transformation or “*radical change that orients the organization to new direction and an entirely different level of effectiveness*”.

ODeL initiatives in Asia could spearhead or spur the transformation of higher education in the region through the following:

1. Making available open learning opportunities. Barriers to education and learning come in various forms. They include lack of: funds to finance education or pay fees associated with education; access to educational facilities and programs because of geographical and physical challenges; and abilities and skills to access educational and learning opportunities. In some cases, lack of peace and order or certain cultural practices and beliefs also present barriers to mobility of individuals wanting to access learning opportunities.

ODeL initiatives in the region relaxed and, in some cases, totally removed many of these barriers. MOOCs, for instance, have open admission and do not charge any course fees, which, in a way, facilitates equity of access to education and learning. As such, education and learning have become ubiquitous – that is, available to anyone, anywhere, anytime, using any type of interconnectivity and appropriate device. This system of learning also caters to the needs of mobile learners. Open universities, as indicated in the previous discussion, are in a position to vigorously pursue open and ubiquitous education since they are not constrained by physical resources like classrooms. Moreover, university resources can be expanded and distributed through the creative use of modern information and communication technologies.

The role of open universities in transforming higher education can be summed up in the following excerpt from the specific call for action of The Paris Message (ICDE, 2015) for:

... higher education to be transformed in order to be able to deliver change in scale and speed of response, realising the potential of the digital technologies within a humanistic framework. Online, Open and Flexible programmes represent an essential component of the global response, recognising the systemic and cultural diversity in Higher Education systems.

It should be noted, however, that equity of access is not enough. Open universities can also ensure equity of learning outcomes by facilitating the learning process for all learners. This

can be done through the use of open educational resources (OERs) which removes the restriction of cost to accessing learning materials. Likewise, through the universal design of learning resources, learning management systems and other collaterals for learning; inclusivity, likewise, should be put in place to take into consideration not only learners who are economically deprived but also those who are physically challenged. Technology or digital exclusion can also be addressed through the accessibility and inclusivity programs of open universities by making instructional content, learning resources, and learner support accessible using any device.

The ODeL system also makes it easier to customize learning programs well-suited to the psyche of Asian learners. As discussed, “Asian learners study with a purpose” and with social mobility and financial rewards as motivations, many of these learners will seize open learning opportunities, implying the potential success of these initiatives in the region – success in terms of enrollment and completion.

2. Promoting the culture of sharing and “coopetition”. Higher education institutions should adhere to the practice of sharing through open data, open research, open journals, open textbooks, and other open educational resources. This culture can hasten the building or construction of knowledge, with research building upon previous research.

The culture of “coopetition” or cooperation integrated into the conventional relationship of competition can likewise be a transformative mechanism in higher education. While competition is still present in terms of knowledge artifacts production and student enrollment and graduation, the culture of openness and sharing can be the gauge of an institution’s accomplishments. The collaboration happening among the members of AAOU is one example of sharing and coopetition – in this case, among open universities in the region. This presence implies a potential influence of AAOU on the role of open universities in transforming higher education in the respective countries where they operate. Likewise, AAOU serves as a platform for higher education collaboration for research, institutionalizing the acceptable quality assurance framework for education, as well as harmonizing standards to facilitate a credit transfer mechanism.

3. Making the work and living environments the learning spaces. Since students of open universities study where they are, there is immediate integration or application of learnings to work and everyday life. Higher education should aspire to this kind of setting, wherein learners are not alienated from everyday life and living and working.

Further, the immediate application of learning in the workplace can spur action research to address current industry concerns. This mechanism of converging theory and practice, or “praxis”, can facilitate theory grounding, which can also spur knowledge construction and production which is a major role of higher education. Industry partnership is essential in this mechanism as learners also bring industry context into the learning environment and, likewise, take the university context into the work environment, which provides an opportunity for higher education to shape the direction and the nature of the industry.

The shaping of the values of the people who will shape the future of industry rests upon higher education, which produces the workforce for industry and can also be responsible for their continuous capability-building programmes and research developments.

4. Facilitating Change. The ODeL system can facilitate the discharge of higher education's social responsibilities which include the following:
  - a. Training and continuing professional development not only for teachers but for other professions as well. Open courses like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) can be a mechanism to ensure that cost is not a hindrance, especially for teachers, to undertake continuing professional development and doing this while working.
  - b. Improvement in the overall quality of education, which, in addition to teacher professional development, can also be done through the development of contextualized open educational resources (OER) as a component of open education practice.
  - c. Making education the core of all sustainable development goals

However, implementing these mechanisms to transform higher education in the region are not without challenges as well. These challenges include:

1. Recognition of certification of learning through MOOCs. Implementation of MOOCs had progressed from simple open online courses offered starting in 2008 to nano degrees/mini masters/certification programs offered by major MOOC providers and universities. However, more efforts should be exerted for wider recognition of certificates of MOOC completion by universities/academic institutions for credit towards a degree, and by industries as credentials for employment or job promotion. The model set by Malaysia and India could serve as a prototype to guide other Asian countries but what would provide greater impact is MOOC certificate recognition across Asian countries. This concern about MOOC certificate recognition, however, has proven to be a function of other factors, such as the quality of MOOCs and an acceptable framework for the quality of this instruction mechanism; standardization of MOOC credits to align with the university credit schemes for formal courses; and appropriate assessment mechanisms to validate learning.
2. Quality of MOOCs and other open learning initiatives. While MOOCs and other open education practices, such as OERs and open access publications, hold much promise to realize the vision of opening up access to quality education and promoting equity of learning outcomes, doubt with regard to the quality of these materials and courses is not without basis. There are questions such as: Who controls the quality of OERs uploaded in websites? Who controls the quality of the instructional content in MOOCs? What are the credentials of "teachers" handling MOOCs and developing instructional content under the OER framework? The construct of quality and openness is such that the moment material is made public, the author or developer is already subjecting the work to public and peer evaluation. With the speed at which information is disseminated at present, the results of such public and peer evaluation can be made known in a short period of time. Likewise, major MOOC providers, and these include universities/academic institutions, subscribe to a generally accepted pillars of MOOC quality which include the credential of the teacher or MOOC facilitator and the

quality of materials used in the courses. For open access publications, it is recognized that the publisher has this responsibility of ensuring the quality of the materials included in the publication.

3. Increase in the level of regional cooperation. The seeds of regional collaboration have been documented, especially among open universities in the region and these proved to be a milestone by themselves, considering that the nature of open universities' operations is such that one can technically disregard geographical boundaries. The challenge, however, is to have more areas of collaboration and more universities who are collaborating with one another. This move can strengthen ODeL programs as well as recognize learning acquired through the ODeL mode of instructional delivery. Likewise, regional collaboration, especially in research, will put the Asian context in the global scheme of ODeL and thus contribute to the level of understanding of the ODeL phenomenon.
4. Sustainability of ODeL. Because of the nature of many open educational practices like MOOCs and OERs – that is, no direct income is derived from them – the major concern is the sustainability of the initiative. Universities, therefore, should explore various models such as instituting policies that would provide work credit to university personnel involved in developing MOOCs and OERs and teaching MOOCs, securing funding related to open education programs and initiatives which can include government funding, and partnering with industries that have stakes in the massive training of potential personnel.
5. Digital inclusion to facilitate learning. One mechanism to ensure equity of access to learning is through open online courses and OERs. However, it is a common knowledge that there are still many countries in Asia where Internet access is a major concern. As of December 2017, only 48.7% of the population in the region have access to the Internet<sup>xxvi</sup>. Pakistan, for instance, has only 22.2% of its population using the Internet while countries like Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have below 20% Internet penetration<sup>xxvii</sup>. Creative strategies will have to be found to make these learning opportunities accessible even offline.

## **Conclusion**

Asia is faced with opportunities for tremendous economic and industrial growth in the next 10 or 20 years. These opportunities, however, will have to be supported by an education and learning construct or framework that will not only respond to the needs of progressing industry but also by improving the overall welfare of the people and their environment. Higher education is thus seen as having to undertake this responsibility as well as consider projected higher education needs in the coming years.

Open and distance eLearning, as practiced by both open and residential universities in the region can play a major role in transforming higher education. Opening learning opportunities can impact tremendously in preparing workers to achieve the potential of the region, especially, in economic and regional development. Likewise, regional cooperation such as the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) can promote collaboration and open sharing, and standardization and harmonization to institutionalize a quality assurance system and thus facilitate a transfer credit mechanism which is also aligned with lifelong learning initiatives recognition and accreditation.

While opportunities to transform higher education abound through ODeL, pursuing this also implies addressing some concerns for the full realization of ODeL's potential.

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Cite this paper as: Bandalaria, M. d.P. (2018). Open and Distance eLearning in Asia: Country Initiatives and Instructional Cooperation for the Transformation of Higher education in the Region. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 5(2), 116-132.

## Notes

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