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Editorial ~ Regional Focus on Asia Major

Changing Faces of Open and Distance Learning in Asia

Insung Jung

Professor of Educational Technology and Communications
International Christian University, Japan

It is no incident that IRRODL begins the year of 2007 with this regional focus edition on “Changing Faces of Open and Distance Learning in Asia.” Over the recent years, there has been tremendous growth and diversity in open and distance learning (ODL) in Asia. With over 56 percent of the global population, Asia has over 70 universities that are dedicated to open access to education, including seven out of 11 of the world's mega universities (universities with over 100,000 active students in degree-level courses) serving six million active students all together (Daniel, 1996). Quite a few distance teaching universities or programs such as the *Bangladeshi Open University*, the *Hanoi Open University*, the *Open University Malaysia*, and the *Open and Distance Learning Program* in Singapore, have been established since the 1990s and now provide tertiary level education to those seeking continuing education opportunities. Virtual universities are growing fast and, with 17 virtual universities in Korea alone! Many conventional, campus-based universities have started to offer e-Learning programs as well. For example, 67 e-Colleges have been established within conventional research universities in China.

Moreover, cross-border education – especially via e-Learning – is becoming a reality today throughout the Asian region. Asia has been a key target market of many Australian universities, the *UK Open University* – institutions that not only seek to enroll Asian students, but franchises and accredits Asian providers. U.S. private providers such as *University of Phoenix Online*, *Cardean University*, *EducAsia*, *Apollo International*, and *UNext* are also in operation in addition to *Universitas 21 Global*, a consortium of 21 research universities including *Fudan*, *Peking* and *Shanghai Jiao Tong Universities* in China, *National University of Singapore*, *University of Hong Kong*, and *Korea University in Asia*.

Cross-border traffic is not all one-way, however. South Asia's *Indira Gandhi National Open University* delivers its programs into Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Doha, Kuwait and Sultanate of Oman, Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles, Vietnam (in collaboration with *Hanoi Open University*), Myanmar (in collaboration with *University of Distance Education*), and Singapore. The *UK Open University* also licenses its courses/ course materials for use by other institutions in the region. Hong Kong, Indian and Malaysian ODL providers are also exporting programs to countries such as Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.

With the increasing number of student enrollments in ODL institutions and the growth of cross-border ODL, especially by for-profit providers in Asia, the issue of quality and quality assurance

(QA) has become more pressing than ever before. According to a recent survey (Jung, 2005) a quality culture has been emerging, if not fully integrated, in the ODL institutions investigated. All mega universities, including seven in Asia, have developed and implemented QA standards and procedures in key areas of distance education activities, and at least three mega universities in Asia surveyed have institutionalized a central QA unit and sought the development of a more systematic and coherent quality culture. Another indicator for the emergence of a quality culture is capacity-building efforts made by the institutions. In their pursuit of quality improvement, at least half of the mega universities now provide continuous staff development opportunities to enhance the knowledge and skills of their academic and administrative staff. Moreover, most of the institutions have been seeking to obtain national recognition as high quality DE providers. Some have gone beyond the national level accreditation and recognition and have pursued international recognition for their services, such as ISO certification. The survey also shows that there exists a variety of QA systems of distance education even though the globalization and competitiveness of higher education and the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) have brought distance teaching universities closer together in terms of developing a common quality culture. It also reveals that in quite a few cases, QA policies are established only at the unit level or only for certain aspects of ODL activities, and thus not firmly integrated into the larger university policy and performance framework.

ICT is a major contributor to the dramatic transformation of ODL in Asia. According to a report published by the International Telecommunication Union (2004), in the past few years growth rates for fixed land lines, mobile subscribers, and Internet users in Asia has surpassed the single digit growth rates seen in other regions. The number of Internet users in Asia as of 2006 is approximately 379 million, 35 percent usage of the world. Further, four Asia countries (China, Japan, India, and Korea) are among the top 10 countries with highest number of Internet users. With the development of ICT infrastructure in the region, ODL institutions in Asia have adopted ICT to support supplementary modes of instruction and, more importantly, as a means of improving student services and providing interactions. As indicated above, ODL institutions and conventional universities have started totally online courses or programs and new virtual universities have been established. There are also evidence that ICT has brought new educational opportunities to under-served students in many developing countries such as Cambodia and Bhutan to name just two. Whereas advanced ICT offers options to both expand educational opportunities and improve upon quality, it poses many new challenges as manifest in the 'digital divide.' In Asia, Internet technologies show very high concentrations of 'inequality,' ranging from nearly 0 percent Internet penetration, to over 80 percent connectivity to the Internet. Even though several international organizations and agencies have been collaborating with developing countries in Asia to improve ICT infrastructure and initiate ICT-based ODL projects, the reality is that ICT-based ODL in Asia today is not narrowing the digital divide substantially. It is not narrowing the gap between those with knowledge and technology and those who lack access and hence, have less opportunity.

All these features have contributed to the development of ODL and shaped current ODL systems in Asia. In recent years, more and more Asian countries and institutions see ODL, especially e-Learning, as an alternative mode of delivery to widen access to education, satisfy continuing educational needs of adults, expand trained workforce, and/ or train teachers to improve the quality of schooling. Pedagogical changes have been observed in ODL. For example, one-way broadcast-based or correspondence courses have been replaced by two-way interactive courses, problem-based, case-based, and/ or resource-based learning. Personalized learning and support services have been introduced in several ODL institutions as well. In addition, conventional universities have been embracing innovative ODL programs and e-Learning. UNESCO's Asia

Pacific Open and Distance Learning Knowledge Base (see <http://asiapacific-odl.oum.edu.my>) introduces some of these pedagogical changes in ODL in Asia. Yet, most ODL institutions are not making the changes necessary to maximize pedagogical benefits of such advanced technologies that promise to bring a more interactive, learner-oriented model to students' learning experiences.

This Regional Focus Issue on Asia

The research articles and case studies presented in this theme issue report, analyze, and evaluate recent ODL initiatives and experiments at the national and institutional levels. In this regional-focus issue, there are four Scholarly Research papers, three Cases, and one Technical Note report. For this issue, I opted to further define IRRODL's Main Section papers as Scholarly Research, Case Studies, and Technical Notes because these papers all have been peer reviewed and impart valuable information to IRRODL's readership.

The first three articles in the Scholarly Research section discuss the possibilities and promises of different types of ODL and identify a number of policy issues, namely, accessibility, changes in institutional cultures and academics' roles, costs, quality assurance, and supporting systems. The fourth article in this section reports on an empirical study on the use of a synchronous technology in the replacement of face-to-face tutorials in an ODL institution.

The first article by Frank Rennie and Robin Mason begins by introducing the higher education system in Bhutan and Nepal within the context of distributed learning development. The authors examine the research and development work currently being done at universities in Bhutan and Nepal, in the design of distributed learning systems across dispersed campuses. This paper also highlights these institutions' future need to introduce elements of resource-based and student-centered learning for campus students to promote flexible learning. Among others, lack of infrastructure and resistant academic culture are identified as two main barriers to the design of distributed learning systems in both countries, where paradoxically, education is viewed as a high priority and as "as a way out of the poverty trap" (p. 3).

Next we move to Korea, the first country ranked worldwide in terms of ICT opportunity, infrastructure, and utilization. The paper by Junghoon Leem and Byungro Lim examines e-Learning in Korean higher education as a means to enhance Korea's academic competitiveness. These authors report on a survey conducted with 201 universities. It shows the convergence of traditional campus-based higher education with distance education, and the blurring phenomenon between the two modes. In Korea, 85 percent of the universities and colleges investigated have implemented e-Learning and are equipped with technical infrastructure and operational supports. This paper points out, however, major challenges in e-Learning, specifically that there is insufficient funding to provide pedagogical supports to both teachers and students, and a lack of quality assurance policies to support e-Learning.

In the next article, we turn to the Philippines, where the ODL experience has been accumulated and ICT infrastructure is moderately established. In the article, Melinda dela Pena Bandalaria explains the evolution of ODL in Philippines in terms of four phases and discusses a wide range of roles that ICT can play to promote and improve ODL practices. The author also examines important factors affecting ICT integration in ODL. Among those factors are geographical locations, lack of knowledge and skills to use ICT, and financial constraints. Pedagogical and social concerns are also highlighted. The author also argues that the increasing use of ICT in ODL can impact not only the teaching-learning environment, but also the development of new

culture, new concepts and understanding, and new aspirations to both the individuals and organizations. The paper concludes with lessons learned from the Philippines' experience to provide ODL strategies for other developing countries.

The paper by Tian Belawati and Amin Zuhairi focuses on the emerging culture of quality and the development of a quality assurance system in the context of Indonesian ODL. The authors present an example of *Universitas Terbuka* (UT) that effectively addresses quality concerns by implementing and harnessing quality assurance as an innovative strategy for continuous improvement in a distance higher education institution in Indonesia. The authors offer an in-depth review of the QA framework and job manuals, strategies for staff involvement in the QA process, internal and external assessment, and benchmarking. The authors conclude that "quality assurance must be developed as institutional policy and strategy for continuous improvement" (p.1).

The paper by Kwok Chi Ng provides a concrete example of institutional efforts to improve the quality of e-Learning via a synchronous technology called *Interwise* at the Open University Hong Kong. Ng discusses the pedagogical implications of replacing face-to-face tutorial sessions with synchronous online tutorials, and the challenges in managing real-time conferences for ODL. In conclusion, Ng highlights the needs for integrating student-student interactions, providing pedagogical and technical supports to tutors, and promoting social dimension of learning.

Case Studies and Technical Report

The Case Studies sections of this regional-focus issue include one analytical report on the current status of e-training in Korea, three evaluation reports of e-Learning experiments in Cambodian Community Information Centers, two universities in Japan, and at the *Jiangsu Radio and Television University* in China. We conclude with one Technical Report examining the emergence of open-source software in China.

Cheolil Lim examines the current status of Korea's corporate e-Learning and suggests new policy directions for improvement. The author first analyses the rapid growth of the corporate e-Learning in Korea over the past six years due to government initiatives. Explored are issues such as lack of diverse e-Learning types for authentic practices in workplaces, inadequate quality assurance mechanisms, and uneven e-training adoption rates across companies. The author concludes with suggestions for developing more dynamic e-Learning programs and providing opportunities for the disadvantaged employees of small- and mid-sized companies.

The paper by Buenafe R. Abdon, Seishi Ninomiya, and Robert T. Raab report on an e-Learning project in Cambodia, which was conducted by selected Community Information Centers in Cambodia in collaboration with several international and regional organizations. The main objectives of this e-Learning project were to determine if e-Learning could address the challenges associated with reaching students outside of the capital of Cambodia (Phon Penh) and to see if e-Learning could work given the low level of familiarity of students with technology. This project found that e-Learning was an effective alternative for delivering tertiary education, especially to underserved students in Cambodia's provinces. The authors, however, point out that lowered cost of Internet access and increased penetration of the Internet in underserved areas of Cambodia remains necessary for implementing e-Learning as a viable approach for reaching underserved learners living in the country's provinces.

In our next paper, Keiichi Kubota and Kiyoshi Fujikawa describe a distance teaching experiment between two universities in Japan adopting online technologies. Described are students'

evaluations and the authors' own observations, which reveal that this synchronous distance teaching project helped two universities share an introductory finance course in an efficient and effective manner. Based on their experiences, these authors encourage instructors to prepare well-informed and well-designed multimedia materials in advance and incorporate tools that promote interaction. The authors conclude with suggestions to combine technology-based teaching with classroom teaching, in order to promote interaction among students and instructors.

Then we move to a case of *Jiangsu Radio and Television University* (JRTVU) in China. In this case study, Zhang Xiangyang and Hung Shu-chiu report on the evaluation result of the pilot multimedia in-service teacher training program in JRTVU. This program, carried out by JRTVU in collaboration with China's *Central Radio and Television University*, the *British Council*, and *Beijing Foreign Studies University*, focused on upgrading teachers' qualification and developing their pedagogic and linguistic competence in English education through integration of the low- and high-technologies. Findings reported indicate that the program helped lower the drop-out rate, increase learner satisfaction, improve learning outcomes, and promote quality of learner supports. It is also reported that the trainees have become more independent learners and have applied learner-centered and communicative task-oriented language teaching approaches in their instruction. The authors then suggest some possibilities for future improvement.

Finally I would like to draw your attention to the paper on the emergence of open-source software in China, written by Guohua Pan and Curtis J. Bonk. The paper begins by introducing open-source software movements initiated by central and local Chinese governments and analyzing the development model of *Red Flag Linux*, the most successful open source software initiative in China. It is highlighted in the paper that unlike other countries, in China open-source software initiatives are strongly supported by different levels of governments, although the needs of educational institutions are not often reflected in these initiatives. In its conclusion, the paper discusses the potential of open-source software as a means to promote more flexible, learner-centered ODL in China.

Careful reading of these papers and reports will reveal that, in general, ODL in Asia is playing an increasingly significant role in national higher education systems and in the private sector. Moreover, they underscore that ODL is clearly becoming an important policy choice for most countries throughout Asia and beyond. ODL is beginning to offer more flexible and interactive learning experiences through advanced ICT, even in less developed countries. It is also notable that various issues related to quality assurance are being raised and some concrete measures are being undertaken in several ODL cases. I hope all these papers will help you develop a better understanding of changing natures of ODL in Asia.

Insung Jung
Regional Editor, IRRODL
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